

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

**THE MYSTERY OF THE
WITCH'S PHONE**



THE
INVESTIGATORS

in

THE MYSTERY
OF THE
WITCH'S PHONE

The latest gadget for children and teenagers is the witch's mobile phone! They glow green in the dark and instead of ringing, they giggle creepily. But then a gloomy shadow sets in when several owners of these phones disappear in an eerie way. At each crime scene, the victim's mobile phone is found, on which the display shows the devil's number '666'. The Three Investigators pick up the trail of the mobile phone, not knowing what to expect on the other end of the line. Very soon, they come up face-to-face with the witch...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Witch's Phone

*Original German text by
André Minninger*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ??? und das Hexenhandy

(The Three ??? and the Witch's Mobile Phone)

*by
André Minninger
(2001)*

*Cover art by
Silvia Christoph*

(2020-08-04)

Contents

- 1. A Lost Bag**
- 2. Electric Shock**
- 3. The Very Latest Scream**
- 4. Caged In**
- 5. The Media's Interest**
- 6. Fairy Tale or Reality?**
- 7. Another Devilish Text Message**
- 8. Darkness**
- 9. The Runic Characters**
- 10. Links with the Kabbalah**
- 11. The Direct Path**
- 12. Pushy Approach**
- 13. Monique Carrera**
- 14. Ambush Attack**
- 15. Single Combat**
- 16. Pete is Captured**
- 17. Predator Instinct**
- 18. Tricked**

1. A Lost Bag

“What a mess!” Pete angrily pointed to the front tyre of his mountain bike. “Some rascal let the air out! If I can get my hands on him!” He clenched his fist in a threatening gesture. “Too bad I don’t have my bike pump with me. You don’t have one, do you?”

His friend Bob stroked a wet strand of hair from his face and shook his head regretfully. The two boys had just finished swimming at the Pacific Ocean and were now standing stunned in front of the bicycle kiosk, which had already closed at this late hour. It was already getting dark, and Bob looked sceptically at his watch. “We will take at least an hour to get the bikes back to Rocky Beach.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Pete replied. “Your bike was spared. You can get on your saddle and ride off!”

“Absolutely out of the question,” protested Bob. “Do you think I’m going to let you wander alone through the forest in the dark? We’ll go together, of course.”

“Let’s go! The sooner we get going, the sooner we’ll get home,” Bob said as he unlocked his bicycle.

“I can’t get myself together again,” Pete continued to rant as he pushed his mountain bike onto the sandy footpath. “Why are there only such idiots? Do they enjoy damaging other people’s property?”

“My guess is a silly little prank. I’m sure they didn’t think about the consequences. So let’s not get upset and talk about something more pleasant—like tomorrow’s maths test.”

“Are you kidding!” Pete exclaimed, who didn’t know what to do with Bob’s dry humour at that moment. “I should have sat down today to study the formulas. Instead, we were lounging in the sun all day!”

Bob smiled. “A period of relaxation before a difficult test sometimes works wonders! I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“Nice of you to encourage me, but I’m sceptical.” Pete pressed the button of his battery-powered bicycle lamp, as they were heading straight for the forest and had already left the last street light behind. Apart from them, there was no one to be seen for a long way off and Pete had a queasy feeling.

“I wouldn’t like to push my bike through here all by myself,” Pete admitted openly after they plunged under the dense tree tops into the darkness of the forest. “I’m better off with you here.”

“You’re not afraid, are you?” Bob asked in a strained voice.

“Is something wrong?” Pete asked suspiciously.

“Well...” Bob looked around probing. “I don’t believe in this sort of thing, but I’m not sure that in this part of the woods, I don’t really feel comfortable...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I happened to come across a rather macabre newspaper article in the *Los Angeles Times* archives. It’s been a while and I haven’t given it any thought. But now, as we walk through here in the dark by chance, it comes back to me.”

“What is it?” Pete urged with unease. “Spit it out!”

“About twenty years ago, followers of a fanatical cult kidnapped a young woman from Santa Monica who had been politically involved in the fight for women’s rights. The cult accused her of witchcraft and burned her at the stake here in the Santa Monica Mountains!”

“You... you’re joking...”

“Unfortunately not,” Bob replied dryly. “The culprits could be stopped and the cult banned, but that didn’t help the poor woman much. Since then, occasional newspaper reports appear reporting that the spirit of the burnt one is still restlessly wandering around here in the forest and finds no peace...”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Pete asked sceptically.

“Of course not. Nevertheless, the press reported strange occurrences. For example, on a full moon night, a group of night wanderers claimed to have heard the eerie whimpering of a woman. And that was exactly from the direction where the terrible crime had been committed. And another time, there were a dozen deer that had died without any apparent cause.”

Pete shivered. “Just the thought of that makes my blood freeze!”

“Okay, I’ll stop saying it. But, you should know—” Bob stopped suddenly. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the forest ground in front of him.

“What’s the matter?” Pete asked insecurely. “What is it?”

“Hold my bike for a second.” Bob slowly approached a depression in the ground, bent over and pulled a square object out of it. From a distance, Pete thought it was a briefcase. He turned his bicycle handlebars so that the lamp shone in Bob’s direction.

“Is that a bag?” Pete exclaimed. “What is in it?”

“Let’s hope nothing bad happens.” Bob inspected the item from all sides and immediately set about opening the buckles. “It looks like a school bag. This thing ain’t exactly light. Seems to be filled to the brim.” His fingers continued to fiddle with the buckles. The waterproof fabric of the school bag was printed with dozens of colourful clown faces.

“It must belong to a primary school student,” Pete surmised. “But why is the bag here in the forest? There’s something wrong...”

“Hello!” Bob cried into the darkness. “Is anybody there?”

The boys pricked up their ears straining. But except for the soft rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the crickets, nothing could be heard.

“Halooooo!” Bob cried louder.

Pete anxiously held the two bikes. “Nothing...”

Bob also felt anything but comfortable. Pete squinted at the school bag. “What do you think is in there?”

“We’ll soon find out.” Bob got closer to the bicycle lamp and directed the beam to illuminate the inside of the school bag. He opened the bag and with tingling fingers pulled out a pile of exercise books.

‘Jeremy Scott—Essays—Class 3’ was written in curly script on the label.

“Jeremy Scott?” Pete kept digging around in his memory. “Never heard of him.”

Bob leafed through one book. “Seems more like a colouring book. Look at this. There are almost more drawings than essays in here!”

“Witches!” Pete cried in disbelief. “Riding a broom, in front of the witch’s house and... and on a stake! All just witches!”

Bob took a closer look at one of the felt-tip pen drawings. “These... creatures with the pointy hats and the green face seem to fascinate Jeremy. They look so sly. Not badly drawn for a third-grade primary student. This boy has talent!”

The other books also contained many pictures of the same theme. After a short inspection, Bob put them back into the bag. Next, he took out two school books. He opened the cover and shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "There's no name and, most importantly, no address listed. What else do we have in here?"

One after the other, a transparent bag with a snack, a pencil case, two folders and a Gameboy with two games came out. Bob looked at Pete questioningly, then he put everything back into the bag.

"The best thing is to drop this off at the nearest police station. I'm sure the officers can locate Jeremy Scott quickly and return his bag."

"But Bob!" Pete lowered his voice. "If there is a crime here... I mean, who loses a school bag in the woods?"

"You almost talk like Jupe," Bob said. He was referring to their friend, Jupiter Jones, who was the leader of their detective agency, The Three Investigators. The three of them had already solved many mysterious cases, way ahead of the police.

"It's probably all quite harmless," Pete remarked. "This Jeremy was probably playing with his friends here this afternoon, and in the heat of the moment, he forgot his school bag."

"Would be nice if it were," Bob said. "But we won't know for sure until—"

Suddenly, an eerie giggle in a croaky pitch tore the silence of the forest apart. At once, both Bob and Pete froze in horror.

"What... what was that?" Pete stammered.

2. Electric Shock

Bob was the first to break free from the paralysis. He pointed to a narrow outer pocket on the side of the bag, where from the opening, a greenish light shimmered. And again the giggling sounded. It was like the gloating laughter of an old woman.

“Wait a minute, I’ll get it!” Determined, Bob undid the Velcro fastener and pulled out a phosphorescent object.

“A mobile phone!” cried Pete in surprise. “With a giggling ring tone!”

“Madness!” Bob inspected the blinking keypad on the weird mobile phone. “A typical ring tone is replaced by a giggle.”

“Then someone’s calling! Go ahead and answer it!” Pete said.

Quickly, Bob pressed the answer button and put the glowing mobile phone to his ear.
“Yes?”

There was a pause before the caller asked: “Wait... Who are you?”

“Bob Andrews here!”

“Bob Andrews?” repeated an irritated female voice. “I want to see my son Jeremy!”

“He... is not here at the moment,” stammered Bob.

“What does that mean?” replied the caller. “Where is he?”

“That’s what we’d like to know, Mrs Scott. My friend Pete and I are in the Santa Monica Mountains. More precisely, at the National Recreation Area. Here in the woods, we just found a school bag. It was in the bushes, but there’s no sign of your son anywhere. We were going to drop the bag off at the nearest police station, when this strange mobile phone rang—or rather giggled—and I answered your call!”

“For goodness’ sake!” Mrs Scott’s voice trembled. “I’ve been waiting for my son for hours. He wanted to go to the seaside for a swim after school and promised me high and holy to be home for dinner at six. Now it is already 7 pm! Where is my son?”

“I don’t like to say it, ma’am, but I think it’s best to notify the police,” Bob recommended with a queasy feeling in his stomach.

“I’ll do that right now! Please stay where you are. I’ll call you right back!” Then she hung up.

Bob let the strange mobile phone disappear into his jacket pocket and looked at Pete with concern. “You were right. Something strange is going on.” He gave Pete a succinct account of what Mrs Scott had said.

Pete shivered. “Once again, we’re in trouble. What are we gonna do now?”

“See if there are any marks or traces.” Bob took off the battery-operated bicycle lamp from Pete’s handlebars and slowly walked, searching the ground with the beam, towards the earth depression where Jeremy’s bag had been lying.

Pete leaned the bikes against a tree and followed him hesitantly. “Well? Is there anything?”

“There are leaves everywhere,” Bob replied. “At first glance, it is impossible to determine whether a fight may have taken place here.”

“A fight?” Pete shivered. “Then you think Jeremy might be... kidnapped?”

“At least we can’t rule it out. But perhaps the whole matter will turn out to be completely harmless. Who knows if Jeremy isn’t ringing his front doorbell right now and sheepishly apologizing for being late.”

Suddenly Pete began to whisper. “Bob!”

“What is it?”

Pete let his eyes circle anxiously in the darkness. “I have a strange feeling... I feel as if someone were watching us all the time.”

“Stop being crazy, Pete!” Bob snapped back. “You’re imagining things, as usual.”

Unexpectedly the shrill giggle sounded again! Bob flinched in fright. “Man, I’m not going to get used to this ring tone anytime soon! That’ll be Mrs Scott.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the mobile phone. “Bob Andrews speaking.”

“Santa Monica Police Department,” a sharp male voice came forward. “We’ve just been informed by Mrs Scott that you’ve come across a school bag in the recreation area whose owner has not yet arrived home.”

“That’s right,” Bob confirmed. “However, we did not notice any signs of a violent kidnapping. The bag was placed in a hole in the ground and—”

“We’d like to check that out for ourselves!” the officer rudely said to him. “Please tell us your exact location and wait for us there. Two of my colleagues will arrive there in a few minutes. We need your statement for the record.”

Bob didn’t like the hard tone of the policeman’s voice at all. But he swallowed his anger and gave the officer the information he needed.

The two detectives did not have to be patient for long. After about ten minutes, two flashing lights approached. The policemen, who shortly got out of the car and equipped with flashlights, questioned the two boys thoroughly. Then they inspected the place where the bag was found and then took down statements from Bob and Pete.

Curious, Pete turned to one of the men after he finally closed his notebook. “What’s the next step? Is there a search going out for Jeremy now?”

The officer shook his head. “As difficult as it will be for his parents, a missing persons report can only be made after twenty-four hours. Often the missing people return home safely within this period. However, if Jeremy hasn’t shown up by tomorrow night, which we all hope he won’t, the matter becomes serious.”

“But if there is a crime now,” Bob asked emphatically, “isn’t it irresponsible to let time just pass by?”

“Write a letter to the president, kids.” The policeman pushed his cap further into his forehead. “We have no jurisdiction over the law.” He reached for the school bag and took it into the back seat of the police car.

“How about you boys?” the other policeman asked. “Shall we drive you home? It would not be in our interest if two more children disappeared without a trace tonight.”

“Thanks for the offer,” Bob waved. “But we prefer to ride our bikes.”

Pete was about to protest when Bob inconspicuously nudged him in the side. So Pete waited until the police had driven away to vent his anger.

“Can you explain to me why you turned down the offer?” he ranted with flashing eyes. “Or have you forgotten that my front tyre is flat?”

“Stop berating me!” Bob defended himself. “If you had even a modicum of pride, you’d know why I refused to be taken home.”

Pete crossed his arms. “Could you please explain yourself?”

“Those two didn’t take us seriously at all and treated us like two little kids!” At that moment, Bob cried out in horror and grabbed his chest with a painfully distorted face!

3. The Very Latest Scream

“Bob! What is going on?” Pete immediately dropped his bike and ran to help his friend.

“I, uh... I’m okay...” Bob stammered. “At least I think I am.” Breathing heavily and with shaking fingers, he pulled the phosphorescent mobile phone from the pocket of his denim shirt. “This darn thing just gave me a big old electric shock!”

“How... how can this be?”

“Please ask me something easier.” Curious, Bob looked at the phone from all sides until his face suddenly lit up after looking at the display. “Aha!”

“Why didn’t you give the phone to the cops?” Pete asked.

“In the excitement, I forgot about it!” Bob pointed his finger at the screen. “Look at this! Somebody sent a message to this phone!”

“A text?” Pete picked up his mountain bike from the ground. “It’s probably more for Jeremy than for us.”

“We’ll soon find out.” Bob nimbly tapped a few keys. “In any case, the electric shock was triggered by the text message. It should signal that a message has been received. Pretty macabre to be startled by such a jolt, and certainly not a suitable toy for someone wearing a pacemaker!”

“What does the message say?” Pete asked impatiently.

As Bob read the message. He frowned, then handed the phone to Pete.

“Huh? What does that mean?” He looked at the display which showed only three digits —‘666’.

“Six, six, six!” Bob added soundlessly.

“Still, I seem to be pretty much on the edge of my seat right now,” Pete remarked.
“What’s the deal with these three numbers?”

“I don’t know much about it.” Bob raised his eyebrows. “But from what I’ve read, three sixes in number mythology doesn’t bode well, Pete. It’s one of the commonly accepted symbols of the devil’s existence. Its roots go back to the early Middle Ages and hasn’t lost any of its fascination with the followers of black magic today.”

“Followers of black magic?” Pete turned pale. “Bob! The supposed witch, who was killed here twenty years ago by the madmen at the stake and whose restless spirit is still wandering around... Don’t you think she might have given us the text...”

“Now, stop it,” Bob said to him with a vengeance. “How could the dead be able to operate a mobile phone? And quite apart from the fact that we don’t believe in such things, how should the deceased know about today’s technology?”

“I don’t care about that! Something’s not quite right here and I’m not at all eager to discuss the existence of ghosts, witches and devotees of Satan with you in this dark part of the forest! I just want to get out of here!”

A crack in the bushes made Pete drive around jerkily. His neck hairs straightened. He squinted his eyes together, recoiled in horror and bounced against Bob. Stammering, he pointed into the thicket. “There... look.”

Bob’s heartbeat accelerated. At a distance of about ten metres, he noticed a scurrying shadow between the trees. He was not sure, but thought he recognized the silhouette of a

pointed headgear.

Driven by panic, Pete swung himself onto his bike and pedalled with all his might. But after only a short distance he realized that he couldn't escape fast enough with the flat front tyre on the soft forest ground. Bob had overtaken him in the meantime. Pete had only one chance—with one leap, he jumped out of the saddle and ran along, pushing his damaged bike.

After coming out of the National Recreation Area panting and exhausted, they stopped.

Bob gasped for breath. "There's nothing more to fear here."

"There was something." Pete kept looking around. "You... you saw it too, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." Bob wiped the sweat from his brow. "And everyone we tell will declare us insane! But I'll stake my life on it. That thing that was scurrying through the woods, watching us, looked like a witch!"

The old mobile home trailer, which served The Three Investigators as their headquarters, stood at The Jones Salvage Yard, owned and operated by Jupiter's uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda. The salvage yard offered all kinds of used junk here that one would otherwise search in vain—curious antiques, objects from demolished buildings, scrap and rubbish.

Jupiter, whose biological parents had died in a plane crash many years ago, was lovingly received by his uncle and aunt at the time and could not imagine a more beautiful home since then. And for the fact that he and his two friends, Pete and Bob, occasionally helped out at the salvage yard, Uncle Titus had given the three boys the trailer for their detective hobby.

The equipment at Headquarters, which The Three Investigators had gathered over time, was really quite impressive. Nothing was missing here—from answering machine, fax machine and computer to the in-house photo lab—everything was available that was necessary for criminal and forensic investigations.

Jupiter Jones, the leader and First Investigator of the trio, had made himself comfortable in the worn out armchair at the trailer this afternoon and listened intently to the report of Bob's and Pete's experience the previous day. He carefully inspected the strange mobile phone, on whose display the text message with the three digits '666' was still shown.

Pete, the Second Investigator, had still not calmed down. "You'll think we're crazy, Jupe, but what was watching us from that thicket was a witch! Her pointy hat and black cape were clearly visible despite the darkness. Bob is my witness!"

"Well..." Bob, who was in charge of records and research, sat with Pete at table and fiddled around nervously with an eraser. "I'm not quite sure what I saw. Nevertheless, I cannot contradict Pete on one point—there was someone hiding behind the trees, who was watching us the whole time." He swallowed. "And I think I saw the pointy hat too..."

"Strange... Quite peculiar..." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. It was a sure sign that the First Investigator was thinking hard.

"The whole thing is not only strange. It's highly sinister," Pete exclaimed. "After all, a child has mysteriously disappeared and presumably the creepy figure in the woods—witch or not—was the kidnapper... Or even worse—why else would she be hiding?"

"And what is the meaning of the strange mobile phone and the mysterious text message," Bob threw into the discussion.

With a groan, Jupiter rose from his armchair and reached for a magazine that was lying on the bookshelf. "The figure in the woods, Jeremy's exercise books with the witch drawings and the mobile phone with the mysterious text message are in a context with each other and that could not be more coherent. One could even say that these events portray a complete picture."

Pete pulled a face. "Could you perhaps express yourself normally for a change, so that we mere mortals can understand the meaning of your words?"

"It's almost grotesque!" The First Investigator flipped through the magazine. "And frankly, I'm amazed you haven't come across it in the media."

Now Bob's patience was wearing thin too. "Please, Jupe! Stop withholding information all the time! What do you think we missed that we should have known?"

Jupiter approached the table, squinting at the mobile phone. "The mobile phone that you stumbled upon in Jeremy's bag is, according to this full-page ad, literally the very latest thing and has only been on sale for a few days."

Jupiter held up the magazine to Pete and Bob, showing them the advertisement from where was a slogan that said: 'The Witch's Phone—The Link to the Afterlife!'

4. Caged In

Bob wanted to rip the magazine out of Jupiter's hand, but Pete was faster. Interested, he skimmed over the advertisement, in which the first thing that caught his eye was the mobile phone, whose phosphorescent casing stood out effectively against the violet shimmering background. The mobile phone was held by a green claw-like hand. The index finger of the other hand pressed a button with a long, pointed nail.

“Witch’s mobile phone with shock effects,” the Second Investigator read the advertising message. “Shattering ringtones in multiple versions, devil’s glow in the dark as well as a shock for receiving text messages.”

“That surge of electricity was really something,” Bob explained to the First Investigator. “Involuntarily, I came into contact with this yesterday. I once got an electric shock from a toaster oven. This witch attack from the mobile phone can easily be compared to that!”

“I can do without both,” Jupiter commented with a brief grin, and then he went straight to the agenda. “The whole story is making me form a theory that’s becoming more and more fixed in my mind.”

“And what is that?”

“Very simple, Bob,” Jupe explained. “Jeremy has created a dramatic production and found in the two of you an audience that an actor could not wish for better. You bought the show he put on there, and he got a thrill from the fear you showed.”

“What are you talking about, Jupe?” Pete grabbed his head in confusion.

“Are you trying to tell us that Jeremy deliberately left his bag in the woods, then disguised as a witch, lurks in the thicket in search of an unsuspecting person who comes along, examines the bag, comes across the drawings in the notebook and the mobile phone, and then flees from a figure in a witch hat and black cape?”

The First Investigator nodded. “This or something similar may have been Jeremy’s plan. The only coincidence was that his mother called at the exact moment you two arrived. The boy must have been rubbing his hands in joy! To add to that, the police arrived. And then he sent you the diabolical text message on a second mobile phone. It was the icing on the cake.”

“Hold on, Jupe!” Bob had got up from his chair and began walking restlessly around the trailer. “What would Jeremy gain by scaring the finder of the bag and his parents?”

“Maybe Jeremy feels neglected and is hoping for more affection through his disappearance or a fake kidnapping?”

“Fake kidnapping?” Bob followed up very closely. “It would be interesting if this whole thing was actually a hoax. Still, I can only hope you’re right in your assumption, Jupe.”

Jupiter was confident. “The figure with the pointed hat and dark cape in the thicket supports my theory, fellas. Jeremy seems to be very fascinated by witches. It’s not unusual for his age.”

Bob made a serious face and gave Jupiter a critical look. “Okay, if you had been in Jeremy’s place, would you have watched helplessly as two complete strangers took your brand-new and probably beloved witch’s phone and ran away with it? Not to mention the Gameboy that was in your bag.” Bob reached for the witch’s phone.

“What are you doing?” Pete curiously approached.

“Something we should have done a long time ago.” Bob’s fingers trembled with excitement. “When someone sends a text message, the phone number of the person who sent the message usually appears on the recipient’s display. Soon we will know who sent the three ominous sixes.”

Now Jupiter also approached with interest. “And?”

“That’s odd.” Once again, Bob pushed some buttons. “Nothing. Nothing at all! Don’t ask me how the sender did it, but this text is completely anonymous!”

“There is witchcraft at play! I told you so!” the Second Investigator burst out.

“Would you please pull yourself together!” Jupiter admonished his friend in an unexpectedly strict tone. “Witches, devils and demons! What nonsense! Such things don’t exist for serious detectives. There is some computer crack at work that is really targeting us.”

“Of course,” Pete replied in an ironic tone. “Jeremy Scott, the third-grade primary school pupil, is a computer hacker of the upper class who has just developed a program that allows him to send anonymous text messages! With all due respect, fellas, that theory is as wobbly as a hippo on a tightrope!”

“Stop bleating at each other,” Bob intervened. “It’s no use. We should keep a cool head and concentrate on what’s obvious.”

Jupiter sank back into the chair. “And what would that be?”

“The first thing we must do is make sure that this phone is returned to its owner or his legal guardian,” Bob said.

“And that would be Jeremy’s parents!” Pete said.

“Right, Pete,” Bob agreed. “And when we contact them, we’ll know immediately if Jeremy has returned home safe and sound!”

The Second Investigator stroked a strand of hair from his face, distraught. “But we do not have the address. We don’t even have the telephone number.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Once again, Bob’s fingers have been typing on the phone’s keypad. “The mobile phone has a memory for incoming calls. Either that, or I can check the address book. I would be very surprised if Jeremy’s parents weren’t listed in it.”

“Good idea.” Jupiter commented.

“Bingo!” cried Bob. “There’s a phone number under ‘Mum’. Should I call or do you want to?”

The First Investigator tapped Bob’s shoulder generously. “Your flair and technical know-how must be rewarded. I leave it to you to receive Mrs Scott’s burst of joy. Because I’m betting that Jeremy has returned home long ago and family peace is restored.”

“Okay,” Pete asked cunningly. “If you are so sure of yourself, Jupe, you wanna bet on it?”

“What is this monkey stuff?” Jupiter brushed Pete off. “Call Mrs Scott now, please, Bob.”

“First place your bet.” The Second Investigator persisted. “What will you do if your prediction is incorrect?”

Bob hesitated. His fingers remained on the mobile phone keys while Jupiter brooded for words. “So... I... um... then... then I’ll go on a diet. From 90 to 80. Eighty-five kilos!”

“Seventy,” Bob demanded.

“Have you gone mad?” Jupiter rebelled. “Be realistic!”

Pete stood firm. “Okay, then seventy-five.”

A few seconds passed before Jupiter finally agreed. “Anyway, I won’t lose.” Victory assured, he stroked his full stomach. “Hey, but what about your bet?”

“We abstain,” shouted Pete and Bob together.

“Cowards,” Jupe remarked. “Go ahead, Bob, do your task.”

With a mischievous grin, Bob called Mrs Scott’s number and pressed the witch’s phone to his ear. His face showed no emotion.

“Nobody’s picking up?” Pete drummed impatiently with his fingers on the tabletop.

That’s when Bob heard a crack on the line. “Hello?” an older woman’s voice said.

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am...” Bob stammered into the phone. “My name is Bob Andrews. I would like to speak to Jeremy.”

“Jeremy?” The lady on the other end was desperate for words. “I’m his grandma... and... and something’s happened to my grandchild!”

Bob felt a lump in his throat. “Like... what do you mean?”

“Fifteen minutes ago, my daughter received a call from the police,” the old lady replied breathlessly. “They asked Melanie to go to the Santa Monica police station immediately. Two people who were walking through the National Recreation Area this morning found my grandson there!” She took a deep breath. “Jeremy was locked in an iron cage and has been in shock ever since.”

5. The Media's Interest

Stunned, Bob hung up the phone and briefly described the new information to his friends. The Second Investigator shivered and looked at Jupiter critically. "So? Are you still convinced that Jeremy instigated the whole thing?"

"I admit that my theory is shaky," the First Investigator confessed sheepishly. "Nevertheless, I will not be convinced otherwise until we have personally examined the new situation."

Bob's ears pricked up. "It's easy to tell from your statement that you intend to personally interview Jeremy about how he got in that cage. Am I right?"

"You got it. During your phone call, I was able to find the address on the residents CD-ROM. Under Scott there is only one entry with the first name Melanie. Resident in Topanga Beach. We should not hesitate to leave immediately!"

Determinedly Jupiter reached for his jacket hung on the back of the chair.

"Are you out of your senses, Jupe?" Outraged, Pete built himself up in front of him. "Weren't you listening to Bob? Jeremy is in shock! He has been locked in a cage, whatever that means, and is now definitely not in a position to answer your probing questions."

Jupiter persisted. "Nevertheless, we are obliged to give him back his mobile phone." Without hesitation, he reached for the mobile phone and put it in his pocket.

Bob and Pete hesitated. The First Investigator used this break to convince them further of his plan. "Furthermore, you are ignoring an important fact in this story. If Jeremy was indeed locked in a cage in the woods, this crime was carried out by a madman. I refer clearly to your statement that you also saw a figure last night in the same area, whose appearance and behaviour cannot be considered normal. I only say 'witch hat' and 'black cape'! Don't you think that your testimony can be of the greatest importance when it comes to catching the culprit? For this reason alone, I consider it irresponsible not to disclose our knowledge immediately!"

Pete breathed deeply. "All right. I admit defeat and I'm in. But before I do, I'd like to remind you of your bet, Jupe, which you have already lost. As Bob's phone call clearly proved, family peace is far from restored in the Scotts. I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that all unnecessary calories are now off your diet!"

Bob took a critical look at Jupiter. "You have lost, Jupe. How to turn it around? And frankly, I can't wait to see you slender and tall before me in the near future!"

"Lean and thin at 75 kilos?" Pete put on a wry grin. "All it does is to take a little air out of the swimming hoop around your hips. Don't worry, Chubby, whether you're 75 or 90 kilos, either way, we can still recognize you with or without your fat layer."

Topanga Beach was a popular destination for surfers on the Pacific. Next to the beach, pastel-coloured souvenir shops stretched between comfortable apartment buildings.

Pete had made it a condition that they had to cycle the distance from Rocky Beach all the way here, as he felt that the First Investigator had to make up for his lost bet immediately without compromise. And part of a successful diet was a balanced fitness programme, and this is an ordeal for someone who hated physical exertion.

After a bicycle marathon lasting almost fifty minutes, the First Investigator was the last to hit the brakes in front of a one-storey, pink-painted wooden house. He gasped for breath. "Modest and inviting," he gave a snort of breath after a brief look around. His sweaty T-shirt was all over his upper body.

Then he glanced at the front door and stopped. In front of it stood a two-person camera team eagerly busy inserting a new video cassette. Half a metre next to it, a black-bearded man about fifty years old stood with a dictating machine in his hand.

Bob's eyes narrowed. "We don't seem to be the first ones on the job, fellas. These guys look like the press to me." The Three Investigators retreated unnoticed and found cover behind a hibiscus hedge.

"How did they get wind of this so quickly?" wondered Jupiter. "I wonder if old Mrs Scott was willing to share information with other callers?"

"I can't imagine, although we can't rule it out either," Bob whispered. "I learned from my dad that an increasing number of journalists and reporters are illegally tapping the police radio in order to arrive at the scene before the police!"

Jupiter and Pete did not doubt Bob's statement for a second. He had to know. After all, his father worked as a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

The First Investigator risked a cautious look over the hedge. The camera team was obviously about to leave the scene and approached the garden gate. As they did so, The Three Investigators were able to pick up the words of the couple who were talking loudly and clearly.

"Grandma's testimony is in the can, Jenny!" rejoiced the man. "We also have the footage of the mother getting out of the car with her son and disappearing into the house."

"With minor restrictions, Larry. Still a bomb story!" The blonde in the denim skirt rubbed her hands together. "We're sure to get a bonus from the network."

Without even looking at The Three Investigators, they rushed past the boys, stowed the camera equipment in the back seat of their car which was parked directly in front of the house. Seconds later, they rushed off with squealing tyres.

"Now the Scott family will probably be famous," Jupiter said his thoughts out loud. "Whether we like it or not, we will hopefully soon find out."

"You think something fishy is going on, huh?" Bob stepped aside, because now the bearded reporter also left the premises and walking towards the garden gate.

In contrast to the camera team, he looked at The Three Investigators with suspicion, which he immediately expressed. "You can forget about spying, boys!" Full of verve, he closed the gate behind him. "There's nothing to see here!"

"Oh, really?" Bob said. "We were just walking past and saw those two TV reporters leaving. You are also a reporter, right?"

The bearded man started blinking nervously and struck a friendlier tone. "I'm a reporter for *Washington Globe Magazine*, and I just happened to be passing here. By the way, my name is Jordan, Jack Jordan."

"Oh, really?" Bob continued. "So what's going on in there?"

"Nothing much that I can tell," the man replied. "I just did a photo report on surfers on the beach... and suddenly, I saw that car from *Network TV*. Those two jumped out and stormed towards this house. Out of professional curiosity, I wanted to check it out, but nothing came out of it. No offence, boys, but I have to dash off now!" Without waiting for a reaction, he hurried away with quick steps.

Pete watched him, shaking his head. "Weird guy! Who wears pink sneakers with a red T-shirt and orange jacket? I can see it shimmering in my eyes."

Jupiter opened the squeaky garden gate and headed for the front door. When Pete and Bob came up behind him, he had already pressed the bell button.

Suddenly footsteps could be heard approaching the door. A key rumbled in the lock and then the door opened. However, it was only opened a gap, restricted by a security door chain.

“Sorry to disturb you,” the First Investigator politely said to the elderly lady. “You must be Jeremy’s grandmother. We’d like a word with his mother.”

“Who is it, mum?” a voice in the background asked. Shortly afterwards, another face appeared in the crack of the door. “Yes?”

“Are you Mrs Scott, Jeremy’s mother?” The First Investigator approached and looked the woman squarely in the eye.

“What’s this all about?” she asked uncertainly. Jupiter pointed to his fellow detectives. “My friends Pete and Bob are the ones who found Jeremy’s bag in the forest last night. We just wanted to tell you—”

Even before the First Investigator had finished his sentence, the door was slammed shut from the inside.

6. Fairy Tale or Reality?

Pete was about to take a breath to express his indignation when he and his friends were proven wrong. Suddenly, they could hear the security door chain being pulled out of the track from inside. Just as quickly as the door had closed, it was opened again. "Come on in, boys!"

Before Mrs Scott let The Three Investigators in, she looked out to the street. There was nobody there. Nevertheless, she urged them to hurry and, after they had entered the hall, she closed the door and put the security chain on again. "Let's go to the living room."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob followed Mrs Scott into a spacious living room. But the room was filled with all kinds of junk, piled almost to the ceiling. The Three Investigators took a seat on an old sofa, which was covered with blankets and pillows with hardly any room to sit.

"It's full here!" Pete said spontaneously. "It's hard to fit a broomstick in the room anymore." His gaze glided over the bulging bookshelves, the wall cupboards which were threatening to collapse under the weight of all sorts of colourful pieces of porcelain in the form of vases, jugs and bowls.

"It's a little messy at our place because we collect all sorts of stuff," replied Mrs Scott. It almost sounded like an apology.

"What do you mean 'we'?" Suddenly, a girl of about twelve appeared in the doorway. "My mum bought all this stuff by herself."

Mrs Scott lowered herself onto a chair. "This impudent lady, who apparently finds it unnecessary to introduce herself, is Jeremy's older sister Hannah."

"And who are you, may I ask?" Curiously, Hannah looked at The Three Investigators.

The First Investigator got up clumsily from the sofa. "I am Jupiter Jones and this is Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews." He reached out his hand politely to her, but Hannah ignored the gesture.

"It's the boys who found Jeremy's bag last night," Mrs Scott told her daughter.

Hannah crossed her arms demonstratively. "The cops brought it to us this morning. Did you come here to collect a reward?"

"Pull yourself together!" Mrs Scott reprimanded her daughter in an unexpectedly harsh tone. "Excuse me, boys, but our nerves are on edge! A madman kidnapped my youngest child last night, locked him in a cage and abandoned him in the woods! Fortunately, an elderly man and woman found him this morning. According to the police, the man rushed back to their car and brought back a car jack. Then he used it to break the bars to free Jeremy."

"The two then drove him to the nearest police station because he was unable to give them his address. Nothing has happened to him physically, but he's still in shock." She swallowed. "I've already taken Jeremy to the hospital. The doctor recommended that I admit him for observation. But I didn't go along with that suggestion. He's better off here in familiar surroundings and I'm with him 24 hours a day."

"Or Grandma," Hannah threw in. She sat cross-legged on the carpet.

"Right." Mrs Scott nodded. "At the moment my mother is keeping watch over him."

"And he really hasn't been able to report anything so far?" the First Investigator asked, apparently casually.

Mrs Scott shook her head. "The police are also baffled."

“What do you mean?” Pete wanted to know. His hands felt wet.

Jeremy’s mother lowered her voice. “After the two people had handed Jeremy over to the police and given their statement for the record, several patrol cars immediately set out to secure the empty cage in the woods. But it was no longer there! However, the two witnesses who had accompanied the police officers to show them the exact location, swore that it was exactly the spot where they had freed my son from that cage. But strangely enough, not the slightest trace was found! No trace of a cage and also no shoe or tyre tracks. Nothing!”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “If that really is the spot, someone seems to have done a neat job of cleaning up the mess—probably the work of a madman. It should never be forgotten that genius and madness are often linked. It would be very enlightening to hear what Jeremy has to say once he gets over his shock.”

“This could be a lengthy process since we don’t have the slightest clue as to what Jeremy’s experiences have been, other than being held in a cage.” Mrs Scott turned to her daughter, who followed the conversation with interest. “Hannah, would you be a dear and put the kettle on in the kitchen. I haven’t had anything to drink all day and I’m beginning to feel very thirsty.”

Without a murmur, Hannah left the living room. In the meantime, her mother went to the closet and took out six teacups of different origin and decoration. The saucers were also colourful.

“We’ll have tea together.” Mrs Scott wrestled a smile from herself in front of The Three Investigators. “But after that, I’m sorry, but you have to leave. After all this trouble, I really must rest.”

“It goes without saying,” Bob relented. “I guess we can get down to the real reason for our visit now.”

On that cue, Jupiter pulled the witch’s phone out of his pocket and handed it to Mrs Scott.

“This mobile phone belongs to your son. In all the excitement, Pete and Bob did not turn it over to the police yesterday.”

At that moment, a little boy in pyjamas appeared in the door frame. His hair stood on end and his eyes were red with tiredness.

“Jeremy!” Mrs Scott turned around as if struck by lightning.

The mobile phone slipped out of her hand and landed on the carpet. She hurried excitedly towards her child. “It’s all right. Mummy’s here with you.”

But Jeremy didn’t seem the least bit interested in his mother. Wordlessly, as if she was not even present, he rushed past her with quick steps and crawled under the table on all fours.

“My witch’s phone!” He was almost gasping. “I finally got it back!”

“Good gracious!” Mrs Scott knelt on the floor next to Jeremy and hugged him as tightly as if she would never let go. After kissing him several times, she stroked his hair tenderly.

“Oh, Jeremy! You have no idea how scared we all were for you.”

“What’s wrong now?” Surprised, Hannah entered the living room. “You’re awake again, Jeremy!” Her tone of voice could not tell whether she was pleased or spiteful. “And what about Grandma? She was supposed to be keeping watch at your bedside!”

“Grandma is sleeping in the armchair,” Jeremy replied curtly. “I woke up and didn’t want to be alone.”

“It’s okay, Jeremy,” Mrs Scott said, “it’s okay.”

Jeremy was holding the witch’s phone tightly and looking intensely at it. “She took it from me and wanted to eat me!” he exclaimed. “She was real, Mummy! She was really real!”

Mrs Scott felt a queasy feeling. With all her strength, she forced herself to remain calm. "Who wanted to eat you, darling? Who was it? You can tell me everything."

Jeremy pointed to a picture on the wall—a felt-tip drawing behind glass that he had apparently made himself. It clearly showed a witch riding a broom and rising into the air over a great fire. "That's what she looked like, Mummy! But her face was not red. It was green! Her teeth were rotten and her chin as pointy as an ice-cream cone."

Now Jupiter could no longer keep to himself. "Where did you meet her then?" he asked cautiously. Only now did Jeremy take notice of The Three Investigators. Uncertain, he sought the closeness of his mother.

"This is Jupiter, Bob and Pete," Mrs Scott told her son. "They found your witch's phone and returned it to us."

"What was that like?" Pete wanted to know. "Where did you see the witch?"

"I was coming home from swimming and I was supposed to go home on the bus with my friends, but then I changed my mind and went into the woods."

"I strictly told you not to do that!" Mrs Scott said in a stern voice.

Jeremy looked bashfully down. "I just wanted to collect my prize..."

"What kind of prize?" Bob beat Mrs Scott to it.

"A limited edition hands-free kit with a witch alarm," Jeremy proudly announced. "And as I am the thousandth owner of the witch's phone, I should receive the surprise prize in the forest."

Jupiter cut. "Who told you that?"

"Someone sent me the text message," Jeremy held up the phone.

"Okay," the First Investigator said. "This text message, Jeremy, asking you to come to the recreation area to accept the prize, does it happen to be still in your witch's phone?"

"I need to check." Jeremy's fingers hit some keys. "It's funny... what is this message? Three sixes? It doesn't show the sender, just like the other one!"

"So the text message asking you to pick up your prize did not show the sender either," Bob reassured himself. Jeremy replied with a nod, as if hypnotized, staring at the display. "I don't understand that. The text is no longer there. Someone has deleted it!"

Mrs Scott became increasingly agitated. "This darn mobile phone and these texting stories are of no particular concern to me. What happened after you entered the forest, Jeremy?"

"But don't give us another one of your many fairy tales," Hannah admonished her little brother emphatically.

To the surprise of The Three Investigators, Jeremy ignored his sister's biting remark. Instead, he fixed his eyes on his self-drawn witch picture on the wall in such a concentrated manner as if it gave him the power to recall his experiences of yesterday in his mind's eye.

"She... she was suddenly there," he began hesitantly. "Although it wasn't dark in the forest. I read once that witches are only seen at night. All around me were trees. But I couldn't see the people or the booth of Vanity Phone World."

"Vanity Phone World?" Mrs Scott asked.

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Mum, It's the phone company that distributes the witch's phone. Go on, Jeremy."

"Suddenly I heard a loud bang behind me," Jeremy continued. "Like an explosion. I almost died of fright! And when I turned around, I saw her standing there laughing. She was wrapped in a thick cloud of smoke, only one step away. It was a witch with a green face and in a black cape! She looked so ugly and evil, you can't imagine it. She swung her broom,

pointed her finger at me and just wouldn't stop laughing! I wanted to run away, but I couldn't. My legs were stuck together like glue!"

"Then what?" Pete got goose bumps.

"Then I started screaming and shouting loudly for help. But the witch did not like that. Suddenly she flashed her green eyes and came towards me..." Jeremy paused for a second.

"Go on!" Jupiter urged tense. "What was next?"

"I can hardly remember. All I remember is that suddenly her thin arm reached out, and her hand grabbed me. I was dragged under her black cape as fast as lightning. Then everything went dark."

Mrs Scott took a sceptical look around the room—first at her son, then at The Three Investigators and finally at her daughter, who demonstratively folded her arms.

"You can't believe that!" Hannah hissed venomously at her brother. "Do you think we're stupid enough to buy this story? Ever since you persuaded Mum to buy you this expensive witch's phone for your birthday, you've been surrounded by witches! You draw nothing else, talk about nothing else and dream nothing else! We should take that phone away from you and throw it in the garbage. Maybe then you'll go back to be normal!"

"Jeremy," Mrs Scott tried to relieve the tense atmosphere. "You've certainly experienced something terrible, but I have to agree with your sister on one point. Your interest in witches has become so intense these past few weeks that your teachers have been in contact with me."

"After the witch had pulled you under her cape, what happened next?" Jupiter encouraged Jeremy to continue his account.

"I can't remember what happened next," Jeremy continued. "At some point, I woke up. It was cold and dark. I was freezing. Then suddenly I realized that I was trapped in a cage made of iron bars. It's like a cage in the circus, where they usually keep wild lions and tigers. I was still in the woods and I was terrified. I did not even dare to call for help. It was so scary. I just cried!"

"I can understand that," Pete added.

Jeremy gratefully noted the comment. He felt that the three visitors believed his words. This encouraged him to continue to report. "Suddenly I remembered my mobile phone. With it I could call for help. I looked in all my pockets, but it was gone! Then there was a noise in the bushes and the witch came back! Slowly she stepped towards the cage and laughed..." He shivered. "I will never forget her laughter... The giggle from the witch's phone is nothing compared to that, believe me."

"Go on, Jeremy," Bob urged, spellbound.

"The witch came ever closer. Then she even tried to squeeze her narrow face through the bars! 'Go away,' I cried. 'Get lost!' But she kept laughing. Then she opened her big mouth with her rotten teeth and hissed: 'Tomorrow night, Jeremy, I'm going to eat you.'"

Pete turned deathly pale.

"I wanted to scream," Jeremy explained, "but at that moment another voice came out of the woods. It seemed to come from nowhere. The witch froze and looked around in horror, but there was no one there but the two of us."

"What was that voice?" Jupiter wanted to know. "And what did it say?"

"It was a man's voice," Jeremy said. "At least, I think it was. He shouted: 'Do you have his phone, Norma?'"

"Norma?" Bob looked it up. "Did he really say 'Norma'?"

"I heard that clearly," Jeremy confirmed. "The witch bowed and promised the voice to continue her mission until she was finally released from the curse. She called him 'Master'. I swear to you!"

“We believe you, Jeremy,” Bob reassured him with gentle words. “What happened next?”

Jeremy made the witch’s phone go from one hand to the other. “The witch and the voice disappeared. Suddenly, nothing could be seen or heard. Eventually I fell asleep until morning. Then an elderly man and woman freed me from the cage...”

“I haven’t heard such a stupid story in a long time!” Hannah exclaimed furiously. “You should be spanked until you finally tell us the truth!”

Now Pete lost his patience. He got up and looked at Jeremy’s sister furiously. “This may all sound like a fairy tale to you, Hannah, but it’s not that simple!”

“Oh, no?” Mrs Scott’s daughter replied arrogantly. “What are you trying to tell us?”

The Second Investigator went up to Jeremy and put a friendly hand on his shoulder. “You will hardly believe it, but Bob and I saw the witch last night too!”

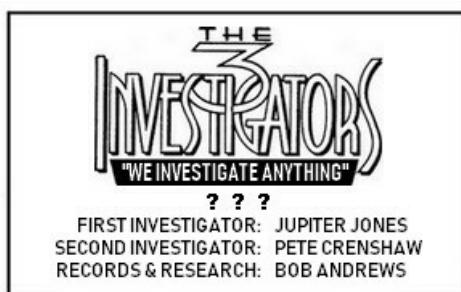
7. Another Devilish Text Message

After Bob and Pete had described yesterday's experience in detail, there was silence in the living room for a few seconds.

"If all this is true, I still don't understand." In desperation, Mrs Scott laid her hands in her lap. "What is the point of all this? I wish we could clear all this up quickly!"

Without further ado, Jupiter pulled a business card out of his pocket and laid it on the table. "Would you be so kind as to take a look at this, ma'am?"

Mrs Scott reached for the card and squinted her eyes together. The card said:



"Investigators?" Mrs Scott repeated in amazement. "You can't be serious. Pardon my asking, but aren't you a little young for that?"

Jupiter kept his composure. After all, it wasn't the first time that adults turned up their noses as soon as they saw one of the business cards. "Age, fortunately, has nothing to do with detective abilities," he confidently said. "And we have often solved tricky cases, ahead of the police by a nose. Our success rate is far above the average for older colleagues, we can assure you of that with a clear conscience. Of course, you can also rely on the sole help of the police, ma'am, but in our experience, the chance of catching the culprit doubles if you have two tracks on the witch's trail."

"Come on, Mum," Jeremy tried to convince his mother after she clearly saw the doubt. "Let them try. After all, they've seen the witch too!"

"All right," she finally agreed. "But only under one condition."

Jupiter already triumphed. "And what is that?"

Once again, Mrs Scott put on a stern face. "In all your investigations and enquiries, you leave Jeremy out of them!"

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Jeremy shouted indignantly.

"You should stay out of the whole incident," Mrs Scott warned emphatically and turned to The Three Investigators again. "If you involve my son in your investigation, you can forget about the whole thing. Without that promise, I won't cooperate with you. Is that a deal?"

"Definitely we can agree on that, ma'am!" As leader of the trio, Jupiter sealed the agreement with a firm handshake. "You can rely on us completely. If you allow, we will now return to our headquarters to discuss the first steps."

"That's not fair!" moaned Jeremy in a croaking voice as Mrs Scott escorted The Three Investigators to the door.

“For goodness’ sake!” Mrs Scott suddenly exclaimed, clasping her hands above her head. A thick layer of mist came down the corridor from the kitchen. “Hannah!” she cried. “You forgot the kettle!”

“Oh, no!” Jeremy’s sister came rushing in quietly.

Mrs Scott ran into the kitchen. They could hear her push the kettle off the stove and rip open the windows.

Jupiter winked conspiratorially at Jeremy. “Tell your mum that we’ll be in touch as soon as we’ve found out anything. And don’t feel bad about it, she means well and is concerned about your safety.”

“Great,” Jeremy replied disappointedly. “Do you know anything about witches?”

Jupiter bent over to him and said: “Shall I tell you a secret?” Jeremy nodded.

“I am convinced that there are no real witches,” Jupe said. “Whoever you met in the forest, it was a person in a rubber mask who wanted to scare you. My colleagues and I will vouch for that!”

“Are you really sure about this?” Jeremy made a serious face and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I wish for nothing more in the world than for you to be right. But when you meet her, you will change your mind.” He held out his hand to him. “I bet you my witch’s phone.”

Jupiter faltered. Immediately his bet with Pete and Bob came to his mind, which he had lost only an hour ago.

“Agreed,” he said. “If I lose, I’ll get you the hands-free kit for your mobile phone, which you’ve been wanting.”

“Done!”

“Madness!” Bob studied the full-page ad on the witch’s phone again. Then he ripped it out of the magazine and attached it to the refrigerator door at Headquarters with small magnets.

“The ad is alluring, I must say. No wonder Jeremy wanted this thing so bad.”

Jupiter was still out of breath. The return trip from Topanga Beach to Rocky Beach on a bicycle had cost him his last reserves of strength. Hungry as ever, he had wanted to go straight for the fridge, but Pete had reminded him of the lost bet. So the First Investigator had to make do with a bland diet. Chewing on a carrot and with a glass of mineral water on his armrest, he cowered dissatisfied in his armchair and kneaded his aching calves. Then the telephone rang.

“Can one of you answer it?” he groaned clumsily. “Ten elephants couldn’t get me out of my chair. I’m finished...”

Pete jumped up, switched on the loudspeaker and picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking.”

“Melanie Scott here,” it sounded from the loudspeaker. Jeremy’s mother’s voice sounded excited. “I’m glad I caught you. Have you heard the news?”

Pete said no.

“I just heard it on the radio. For two days, a girl has been missing in Venice, ten-year-old Grace Moreland! It... it’s scary.”

“What do you mean?”

Mrs Scott was hardly able to speak in coherent sentences. “Apparently... that’s how I understood it... She suddenly disappeared... in broad daylight... away... without a trace. They just found... her jacket on a park bench. And in her pocket was her witch’s mobile phone... and on the display appeared again the three diabolical numbers—six, six, six!”

8. Darkness

“What do we do now?” Bob asked the group after Pete hung up the phone.

Jupiter nibbled a carrot. “Don’t you see the light, fellas? In my opinion, there is a certain lead to be followed. Think and use your wits!”

Pete and Bob exchanged questioning looks.

“Is it really that difficult?” Jupiter radiated superiority. “They’ll find the missing girl soon, I’m quite confident. And I shouldn’t be surprised if little Grace, after her rescue, will also report about being kidnapped and held captive by a witch.”

Bob could not understand Jupiter’s statement. “What makes you think so, Jupe?”

“Do you think it is a coincidence that a witch’s mobile phone was also found at the scene of the second child kidnap? There’s a strategic intent behind all this!” Jupe quipped.

“And what is that, if I may ask?” Pete asked.

“Since when are you unable to put one and one together?” With his index finger stretched out, Jupiter pointed to the advertisement Bob had placed on the refrigerator door a few minutes ago. “To have children, who already have this new toy, kidnapped by a witch, serves only the purpose of using the media to drive up the sales of the witch’s mobile phones! As we know, the press, television, and radio stations are already zealously working on the matter! Can there be better and cheaper advertising?”

“Advertising child kidnaps?” Pete turned up his nose. “You don’t believe that yourself! After these negative reports, I would stay away from these creepy mobile phones. Who would like to consider the prospect of being captured by a witch and locked in a cage in the dark forest?”

“I’m quite convinced otherwise.” Jupiter reached for the mineral water bottle and poured himself a second glass. “In my opinion, the fantastic thrill in possession of a witch’s mobile phone and the possibility of experiencing this creepiness is a special attraction for young buyers.”

“To me, it is playing with fire,” Bob interjected philosophically. “I’m not a lawyer, Jupe, but don’t you think Vanity Phone World, which distributes these witch’s phones, is aware of the consequences of their advertising campaign if they’re found out?”

Jupiter nervously pinched his lower lip. “Your doubts are justified, Bob. Still, I don’t want to believe in a coincidence connecting the witch’s phone with kidnapping and witchcraft. Somewhere there’s a direct connection that needs to be found out.”

“And where do you think you’ll start, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“That’s easy.” Jupiter pointed at the refrigerator door again. “At Vanity Phone World. Why don’t you switch on the PC, Pete, and put the address CD-ROM in the drive. We’ll phone Vanity Phone World and make an appointment. I’d imagine a face-to-face meeting with the managing director would be very enlightening.”

Within two minutes, Pete had found what he was looking for. Determined, Jupiter reached for the telephone and dialled the corresponding number. After a few seconds, he hung up.

“Engaged?” Bob wanted to know.

“The answering machine started,” Jupiter said. “Friday afternoons are off-limits. A computer voice told me to try again on Monday morning.”

Pete reached for his hooded jacket. “Then I’m safe in assuming that The Three Investigators will also be taking the weekend off.”

“Far from it, Pete.” Jupiter shook his head firmly. “It is our duty to go to the recreation area to look for traces of the cage that was put there but was later removed. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time that the police had missed clues that immediately caught our attention.”

“I’m happy to do that,” Pete said and pointed to his watch with a sceptical look. “But I would only enter this forest in the daylight. If you value my presence in this investigation, I must irrevocably put you off until tomorrow, because it will soon be dark. How about you, Bob?”

“I agree. After all, tomorrow is another day.”

Ponderously Jupiter rose from his armchair. “All right. Then I’ll meet you here at Headquarters at 1 pm after lunch.”

“What lunch?” Pete asked sarcastically. “After your losing bet, you should be satisfied with an apple.”

The First Investigator sourly pulled the corners of his mouth down. “Would you please have the kindness to leave my dietary restrictions to me? I will honour our agreement as agreed!”

Bob inserted the video cassette into the recorder and made himself comfortable on his bed. Last night, he had programmed the recording of the first episode of the new *X-Files* season, which he now wanted to watch at his leisure. Before starting the recorder, he turned on the TV and zapped through the channels. On the news channel *Network TV*, a speaker suddenly read out a name that made Bob sit up and take notice.

“... Nine-year-old Jeremy Scott was the first victim of the apparently mentally-deranged kidnapper,” it sounded muffled from the TV. “Three other children are now missing—11-year-old Pete Crownin of Anaheim, 9-year-old Alan Baker of Santa Barbara and 10-year-old Grace Moreland of Venice.” The photos of the three missing children were displayed on the screen.

“The police assume that all four kidnaps were carried out by the same person,” continued the newsreader, “since in each case, a mobile phone was found that was previously in the possession of the missing children. Strangely enough, these mobile phones are of the same model—the phosphorescent witch’s phone from *Vanity Phone World*.”

“This mobile phone, according to the advertisement, enables one to make contact with the afterlife. It has only been on the market for two weeks and is particularly popular with young buyers.

“Is there any connection between the kidnaps and the witch’s phones? Our reporter Jenny Collins has been investigating that question and came up with a very interesting lead.”

Bob had to look twice. On the screen, he recognized the reporter who was with the cameraman in front of the Scotts’ house in the afternoon.

She stood excitedly in front of the garden gate and, clutching the microphone tightly, pointed to the front door behind her. “We are here at Topanga Beach. As we have just learned from reliable sources,” she threw her blond hair back, “that nine-year-old Jeremy Scott was the victim of an extremely despicable kidnapping.

“The primary school pupil, considered to be particularly sensitive, was ambushed last night in the National Recreation Area in Santa Monica by an unknown perpetrator who held him in the woods. He was found there this morning by two people. Unfortunately, Jeremy and his mother are not available for an interview.”

A rapid sequence of images showed Mrs Scott parking her car directly in front of the garden gate, getting out with Jeremy and disappearing into the house without comment.

“Nevertheless, *Network TV* has succeeded in establishing a connection between this kidnap and the mysterious disappearance of the three other children.” Jenny Collins again addressed the television viewers.

Apparently the reporter had used all the tricks of the trade. Somehow, she managed to get to Jeremy’s grandmother. The camera was pointed at the old lady who actually looked reluctant to say anything.

“I can’t tell you exactly,” said Jeremy’s grandmother, sounding very insecure. “All the police told my daughter over the phone was that someone put Jeremy in a cage and abandoned him in the woods.” She struggled with tears. “Oh, that’s awful. We gave my grandson a mobile phone for his birthday as a precaution so he could call for help at any time if he got in trouble.”

Jenny Collins pricked up her ears. “What kind of mobile phone was it?”

“Some kind of modern device that glows in the dark and makes a terrible giggle instead of a ring tone.” The grandmother pulled a handkerchief from her gown and snorted her nose.

Now Jenny Collins face appeared on the screen in close-up. “This, dear viewers, suggests that Jeremy Scott is the first victim of the kidnapping series that has been keeping the whole of America in suspense. The witch’s phones of the company Vanity Phone World plays an unmistakable and as yet unsolved role. The press office of the said phone company has not yet commented on the incidents, but in view of the negative publicity and the growing pressure from the media, a statement is expected shortly.”

“So much for the recent child kidnapping cases,” the newsreader continued with his programme. “Next up is the weather.”

“That’s awesome!” Bob was sitting vertically on the bed. Jupiter and Pete absolutely had to be informed. Then there was a knock at the door and Bob’s mother stuck her head in the room.

“Phone call for you!” she called. “Jupiter is on the line.”

It’s thought transference, it shot Bob through the head. At a record-breaking pace, he jumped out into the hall and grabbed the phone. “Hi, Jupe! Did you just watch the news?”

“Indeed,” Jupe said. “But that’s not why I’m calling. Whatever you’re doing right now, postpone it until later and get on your bike!”

“What’s up, Jupe?”

“I just took a look at our e-mail inbox. The witch’s phone case is developing!”

“Could you be a little more specific?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “Mr Moreland, the father of Grace, the girl who’s been missing for two days, sent us a message.”

“How did he get our e-mail address?”

“He got in touch with Mrs Scott,” Jupe replied. “Be that as it may, he urges us to see him and his wife today because he wishes to speak to us urgently on the matter of his daughter’s kidnapping.”

“Can’t we do this first thing tomorrow?” Bob moaned. “I was about to watch a video...”

“I can’t hear properly,” Jupiter excitedly said to him. “Do you want that Jenny Collins to beat us to the punch? You can also watch your video later! I have already informed Pete.

Meet me at 8 pm at the corner of Castro Drive and Hillwood Street. Be on time.”

The subsequent crackling on the line made it unmistakably clear to Bob that Jupiter had already hung up the phone.

“What an impudence! He’s out of his mind!” Bob said to himself.

“Is there trouble?” Curiously, Mrs Andrews approached.

“It’s all right, Mum,” Bob explained with an annoyed expression. “But one day, I will repay Jupiter for his high-handedness, I swear to you!”

Castro Drive, on the corner of Hillwood Street, was fortunately not too far from Bob’s home by bicycle. It took him only a quarter of an hour to cover that distance. When he arrived there two minutes before the agreed time, his two friends were already waiting under a bright street lamp with their bikes.

“Well then. Where does the family live?” Bob came straight to the point. He wanted to get the visit to the Morelands over with as quickly as possible so that he could perhaps enjoy his video that evening after all.

Jupiter pointed to a darkened backyard that did not exactly look inviting. “I’ve always wanted to take a look into these run-down barracks. Now, finally, an opportunity has arisen.” Full of zest for action, he pushed his bike into the unlit passage of the courtyard.

“Did you see the news earlier too, Pete?”

“Only a bit, Bob,” Pete replied. “I was having dinner with my parents and the TV was playing in the background. This reporter seems to be on her toes.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jupiter agreed with him. “And that’s why we must hurry, otherwise she’ll solve this case before us.”

“Which I wouldn’t mind.” Pete cringed. “I don’t like any of this. Couldn’t we have come here during the day, Jupe?”

“Mr Moreland wrote that it was extremely urgent,” Jupe said. “In view of the fact that his daughter has been kidnapped, we should not let a minute pass by unnoticed.”

“Especially since we can expect that Jenny Collins to show up any second,” Bob added.

“You said it, Bob.” Determined, Jupiter stepped through the archway and pushed his bike into the courtyard. There was no light behind any of the windows.

“Nobody lives here,” Bob noted with trepidation. “It’s only 9 pm. The residents of the entire block could not have all gone to bed.”

“This must be it. Number 473B. Did you bring your flashlights?”

“Aaahh, I left it at home,” Bob confessed sheepishly.

“Me too,” Pete repented and joined in. “I should get one to hang around my neck.”

“You are beautiful detectives to me.” Jupiter leaned his bike against the wall and pulled out his flashlight. Then he shone it over the yellowed name plates. Suddenly his face lit up. “Moreland! So we’re in the right place.”

“Is there light here?” Pete asked. He pushed past Bob and pressed a red switch. Everything remained dark. Then he pressed the bell button. Even after a few seconds, there was no reaction.

“Well, I guess there’s nobody here,” Bob said with a shrug of his shoulders.

But the First Investigator did not give up that easily. He pushed down the handle of the rotten stairwell door and with a satisfied smile, he noticed that it was unlocked.

Pete took a fearful step back. “Jupe! You’re not going in there?”

“Scaredy-cats can wait outside,” Jupiter whispered, while he let the beam of his flashlight shine on the dilapidated staircase. “What about you, Bob?” he asked. “Are you chicken?”

out too?"

Bob felt his honour had been offended. "What are you thinking, Jupe? You think I'm scared?"

"Let's go!" Boldly, Jupiter went ahead. "According to the name plate, the Morelands' apartment is on the second floor."

"Wait for me," Pete hissed to his friends. "Surely you don't want to leave me alone down here!" Hesitantly and with a beating heart, he followed them towards the stairwell.

9. The Runic Characters

The squeaking of the rotten steps went through The Three Investigators' leg. Pete felt that his courage was being tested thoroughly. He hardly dared to breathe and clung to Bob's belt with one hand. When he reached the first floor, Jupiter shone a light on the name plates of the two opposite doors. 'Brandon' and 'Douglas' were written on it.

"Higher, fellas." Curious, Jupiter made his way up to the second floor. Again he shone his light on the name plates. "Hmm... this plate is so faded. I can't make out the name."

The cone of his flashlight swept to the other door. "This is the place. 'M. and G. Moreland'." Determined, he pressed the bell button. Not the slightest sound was heard.

"Maybe the power went out temporarily in this whole block," Bob speculated, but had to admit immediately that this assumption, though not impossible, was quite improbable.

"Mr Moreland?" Timidly Jupiter knocked on the door. At that moment, Pete let out an anxious sound. The door had only been ajar and it swung silently inwards. It was pitch dark in the apartment.

"Mr Moreland?" Now Jupiter had heart palpitations. He shone a light down the hall.

"Looks like nobody's here," Bob whispered.

"Something's wrong..." Pete whispered back. "Let's get out of here!"

"Mr Moreland, Mrs Moreland?" Jupiter called out. His cries echoed muffled from the bare, damp walls.

Slowly, he put one leg in front of the other and entered the apartment. On the right side of the corridor was the first door. This time he refrained from calling for the occupants and just pushed the handle down. The door was locked. Bob and Pete did not leave Jupiter's side.

"There's another room," Bob hissed, pointing to the left. "That door is open!"

The cone of Jupiter's flashlight changed its position by one hundred and eighty degrees and shone into the adjacent room. There was not a single piece of furniture here. The worn parquet floor creaked under Jupiter's weight when he entered the room.

"I want to get out of here," Pete demanded in a thin voice. "Whoever called us here, something's fishy about it!"

The First Investigator held his breath in surprise. "Look at this." He illuminated the right wall, on which someone had painted strange characters in black paint.



"What are these characters?" Pete stammered.

"Shine a little closer," Bob asked Jupiter. Then he frowned in surprise. "I think I can tell you what these characters are." Bob took a step back to get a better overview. "If I am not wrong, these are letters of a runic alphabet, traditionally known as Futhark."

Pete had to laugh against his will. "Fut what? What is that?"

"Futhark," Jupiter took over the explanation. "An early European alphabet and writing system from the second century."

"A strange name for an alphabet," Pete replied. "How do you know that for sure?"

The First Investigator stroked a strand of hair from his face with an important hand movement. "If you want to educate yourself, stick your nose in an encyclopedia now and then, Pete."

"Or watch the occasional episode of *X-Files*," Bob countered. "That's where my information comes from."

"Futhark... Sounds kind of weird," Pete remarked.

"The name comes from the letters themselves," Bob continued. "The first six letters of this alphabet are 'f', 'u', 'th', 'a', 'r' and 'k', so combining them gives you 'Futhark'. The letters of a runic alphabet are also known as runes."

"Runes! Aha! I know that from the role-playing game 'Dungeons and Dragons'," Pete brought his part of the general education with him.

Bob smiled. "Exactly. In some places in Europe, especially in Germany, England and Ireland, you can still find rune inscriptions in buildings from that time. But what these markings on the wall mean, I cannot tell you now." He pulled out a pen and a notepad and drew the mysterious symbols meticulously. "I'll check on it at Headquarters, using the Internet."

Suddenly an icy terror went through the limbs of the First Investigator. He put his finger to his lips and instinctively switched off the flashlight.

"What's got into you?" protested Pete loudly. "Turn the lights back on now!"

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a slight blow in the side. "Quiet, Pete!" he hissed at him.

The Three Investigators pricked up their ears. From the corridor, they heard a soft, elongated squeak, apparently caused by the rusty hinges of the apartment door. Shortly after, the door snapped shut with a muffled snap.

Pete didn't dare to move. He strained to listen whether someone had entered the apartment. But apart from his own heart beating up to his neck, he could hear nothing. Jupiter and Bob felt the same. They remained motionless in the room for a minute until the First Investigator freed himself from his rigidity and stepped out into the corridor. Here he switched on his flashlight, with which he illuminated the surroundings at lightning speed. But nobody was to be seen.

"Look, Jupe!" Bob pointed to the dusty floorboards outside the closed front door. Shoe prints were clearly visible.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. "There's nothing to see but our own tracks. Then a draft must have pushed the door into the lock. And I thought our last hour had come. Let's get out of here!"

Before the First Investigator followed his friends into the stairwell, he took a quick look at the empty kitchen, which only had a sink and an old gas stove. He left the apartment with a frown.

"Apparently, this is a building earmarked for demolition," Bob made his assumption. "But why did this Mr Moreland e-mail us to come here?"

Suddenly, a deafening bang sounded behind The Three Investigators and twitching flashes of light illuminated the floor. Pete almost tripped down the stairs in shock, but at the last moment, his hand got hold of the railing.

"Goodness!" Bob gasped. He couldn't believe his eyes.

At the top landing, surrounded by lightning and wrapped in a thick cloud of smoke, stood a broom-swinging figure in a black cape. A pointed hat, also black, with a wide brim, was enthroned on the green head. A blood-curdling laughter roared through the staircase.

“You will pay for meddling in things that are done by order of the devil!” Angrily, the figure swung her broom. “This is the first and last warning. Stay out of everything! Otherwise the devil will destroy you. And I will gladly help him!” The witch then gave a hoarse giggle.

“We... we don’t believe in you!” the Second Investigator suddenly stammered. He himself was surprised at where he got the courage from. “You are not real!”

For a second, the figure’s facial features froze, until suddenly the corners of her wrinkled mouth were surrounded by a devilish grin and her eyes began to glisten. “I hereby curse you...” Slowly she pointed her index finger at Pete, glided, almost floating, down the stairs and approached The Three Investigators.

Jupiter kept a clear head. He waited until the witch had approached them at about one metre, then he took the offensive. “After her!”

Ready for everything, Jupiter jumped forward and got hold of the figure’s shoulder. But he hadn’t counted on her quick reactions. The witch swung her broom and gave the First Investigator such a violent whack with the end of the handle that the torch fell out of his hand and he, surrounded by stars, sank to the ground. In contrast to Jupiter, the torch did not survive the hard impact. The light glowed once more for a moment, then it was pitch dark in the stairwell.

“We can handle you,” Bob cried, determined to fight. But a fierce kick to his stomach ruined all his plans.

With one jump, the witch went over the banister. In the darkness, Pete saw only a faint shadow, but that was enough. His hand jumped forward and grabbed at it. He felt his fingernails run sharply over the witch’s face, then he heard a shrill scream that made him retreat in fright. The witch used this moment to escape.

“She’s getting away!” Jupiter straightened up again with a sore head. “After her!”

Bob was also again in control of his situation. Closely followed by Pete and Jupiter he stormed down the stairs, determined not to let the witch escape. But it was too late. When they entered the courtyard, the figure was long gone.

Pete was sweating out of his pores. “One more experience like this, friends, and I’ll quit my job as a detective, I swear to you! Either way, I’ll have nightmares. But after the witch’s curse that’s on me now, I don’t dare go to sleep at all.”

“Now get a hold on yourself, Pete,” Jupiter confronted him with reality. “The production was presented in a creepy way, but I think we all agree that someone is taking us for a ride.” There was a big bump on his head.

“I can only agree.” Even Bob could still clearly feel the heavy kick the witch had given him. “Judging by the strength and build, I’d say he is a man. But there are women who can protect themselves very well. In any case, the masquerade deserves praise.”

The Second Investigator did not seem to be convinced by the views of his friends. “So you mean we are dealing with a man in disguise?”

Jupiter nodded. “No doubt about it, Pete. Black cape with witch hat, green gloves, a broom and a rubber mask; and add in light and smoke effects, the illusion is perfect!”

“A rubber mask, eh?” Pete suspiciously reassured himself.

Jupiter nodded again.

“Then I look forward to your explanation, which I hope you’ll give me when I show you something.”

The First Investigator raised his eyebrows in tenseness. "What are you talking about, Pete?"

"So you firmly believe that the green, ugly witch's face was really a rubber mask?"

"What do you think, Pete?" Bob asked. "No man is born with such an ugly face."

"I tried to stop the witch from escaping and got my fingers in her face. If this was really a rubber mask, how do you explain this?" Slowly, the Second Investigator raised his right hand.

Jupiter's and Bob's eyes widened in horror. Pete's fingertips were covered with blood.

10. Links with the Kabbalah

It was now Sunday, and the Three Investigators were at Headquarters.

Highly concentrated, Bob looked at the computer screen at Headquarters. Only when he had activated the print command in the menu bar did he turn around and greet Jupiter and Pete, who in the meantime had just come into the old trailer.

“Hi, fellas,” Bob called out, waiting impatiently for the printout. “After our experience yesterday, I lay awake for a long time and could only close my eyes well after midnight. But even more eerie than the witch apparition is what I could find on the Internet as answers to our questions.”

The loud buzzing that began not only signalled that the printing process was beginning, but also how outdated the device was. The whole desk vibrated, while the printer took a full two minutes to eject just four sheets. Proudly, Bob sat down at the table and made himself heard with a loud clearing of his throat.

“I fed the search engine with three keywords that I’ve used in our previous investigations into the case. I thought the ‘witch’s mobile phone’ was important,” Bob began his introduction. “First, I entered the term ‘666’—the mysterious number that now appeared repeatedly on the phone’s display. You may not think it’s possible, but when you search for ‘666’ on the Internet, you get about 360,000 hits.”

Pete blew his cheeks in amazement. “How did you manage to handle this much information.”

“I can’t,” Bob had to admit. “And that’s why my search on the subject hasn’t turned out very well. Nevertheless, I think I’ve found something useful.” Before he started to read, he took his gum out of his mouth and put it in the waste basket.

“So listen...” Bob began. “Number mysticism is an ancient science of the deeper meaning of numbers and their relationship to the letters of the alphabet. The knowledge underlying the analogies between language and mathematics has lost its place in today’s rational world. Only a few people still deal with this subject.”

Almost timidly Pete raised his hand. “I hate to interrupt your lecture, but if I’m to follow you, someone has to explain what analogies are.”

“That’s quite simple,” Jupiter said pompously. “Analogy is the equivalent in two different systems. So in this case, each letter is assigned a number. Can Bob continue reading now?”

“I’m asking for it,” Pete sounded overly polite.

“But in the past, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, the science of numbers was considered a serious field of knowledge,” Bob continued. “It is found in all developed cultures. For example, it is a discipline of the Jewish Kabbalah, a school of thought that claims to be able to explain man and the universe.” He cleared his throat.

“Now what is the relationship between letters and numbers? In number mysticism, one assumes that all the forces of the universe and also all the properties of a human being can be expressed by numbers or letters. For the initiates of this field of knowledge, these numbers are symbols for the corresponding cosmic forces. The same applies to the letters. Each letter has a very comprehensive meaning in the mystical field of knowledge. But the interesting

thing is, since both letters and numbers deal with the same forces, letters can be equated with numbers.”

“And how does that work?” Pete asked with interest.

“I’m getting to that now,” Bob replied. “You need to have the key for the correct assignment. The Jewish Kabbalah, for example, provides such a key. For this reason, any number made up of several digits can also stand for a particular word and vice versa. With this knowledge in mind, over the last two thousand years, the Christian mystics have been trying to decipher the number 666. Some translators write 666 as the number of a human being, others translate as follows—666 is the number of a person, that is, a specific person.”

The First Investigator lounged in his armchair. “While it can’t hurt to know, Bob, I’m still waiting for the fuse to blow.”

“You no longer need to wait, Jupe,” Bob said and read on. “But other researchers saw in 666, a spirit being that exerts its influence on human consciousness. One of them was the famous Kabbalist Heinrich Agrippa, who taught throughout Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. Using the Hebrew Kabbalah of numbers and letters, he deciphered it to be the spirit being Sorath.”

“Hebrew?” Jupiter wondered. “Is there any connection with the strange characters we saw in the empty Moreland apartment yesterday?”

“Wait,” Bob responded with an impatient gesture of the hand. “First listen to what it says here about Sorath. The spirit being Sorath, also called Satan, is understood to be a force that strengthens the ‘lower’ person or—even better expressed—the lower qualities in a person. Here we encounter the cold nature of a being that has only one goal—to subjugate the individual human being and to control his will. This evil danger must be recognized and countered.” Silently he let the sheet sink to the table.

“So much for the three sixes,” the First Investigator commented on Bob’s lecture. “I’d like to hear what you found out about the mysterious symbols in the Moreland apartment. I trust you’ve been able to find something conclusive about that as well?”

Bob followed this request without hesitation. “Yes. I next did a check on runic alphabet. And again, the Internet helped me. It is as I suspected yesterday, the characters on the wall are from an early European alphabet from the second century of the Common Era.”

“So it’s Futhark?” Jupiter asked.

“Exactly. There are a few variations of Futhark. I was able to ascertain the respective meanings of these runic letters from the oldest form—one known as ‘Elder Futhark’.” Bob lifted up a printout illustrating the symbols. “This first character here, remotely resembling a crooked ‘F’, is called *fehu* and it symbolizes ‘possessions’. The second character, which looks like a witch’s hat in a vertical position, is called *thorisaz* and it represents ‘conflict’.”

Pete became uncomfortable.

“The third sign here is called *nauthiz*,” Bob pointed his finger at it, “and it stands for ‘fate’. The last symbol we have is this arrow pointing upwards is *tiwaz*. It represents ‘justice’.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “‘Possessions’, ‘conflict’, ‘fate’, and ‘justice’. Perhaps they are clues for something. How do these terms fit into the witch’s phone?”

“I can’t figure it out,” Pete impulsively intervened. “I can only warmly recommend that we withdraw from the case as quickly as possible and leave the matter to the police! You may not believe in witches, but I am convinced of the existence of these shadow beings... especially after I scratched the face of one of these creatures yesterday—a face that you took for a rubber mask!”

“Get a hold of yourself, Pete,” the First Investigator said. He cracked his fist on the table. “You’re behaving like a little child. Even Jeremy seems to have more guts than you do.”

When he saw Pete flinched in dismay, he struck a softer key. “Pardon my outburst of anger, Pete. It may be that this diet and the associated hunger pangs are eating away at my nerves. But I still wonder what’s got into you? In our whole career as detectives, we’ve had dozens of cases with alleged ghosts, devils, demons and other spooky creatures and none of them were real in the end. And that’s the way this case is gonna turn out.”

Pete did not see eye to eye. “Even you, the First Investigator, are not necessarily the brightest bulb in the box! Perhaps we’ve come to a point where we must realize that there are powers that cannot be explained rationally.”

“Maybe I can smooth things over,” Bob intervened. “I’d like to present you with the third piece of research I’ve done. After that we can still decide whether we want to leave the case or stay on it.”

“So let’s hear it,” Jupiter urged him on.

11. The Direct Path

Bob reached for the two remaining prints. "It's about this horrible crime committed twenty years ago at the National Recreation Area in Santa Monica."

Pete looked up, "Are you talking about the young politician who had campaigned for women's rights?"

Bob nodded. "Yea, and she had to pay with her life because a crazy cult had accused her of heresy based on her courageous and reasonable election campaign."

"But why?" Jupiter asked himself objectively.

"Those responsible for this crime, who were fortunately caught and convicted, gave a statement in court explaining their actions." Bob studied the printouts. "In their eyes, Norma Nolla was a witch whose beliefs did not fit the cult's view. Norma Nolla was a strong public advocate for equality between men and women. She demanded equal pay, equal rights, equal prestige and the ban of the term 'the weaker sex'. 'Equal rights for all' was her motto. But she could no longer reap, let alone enjoy, the fruits of her seed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pete asked.

"Very simple, Pete," Bob replied. "After the horrible crime became known, California was in turmoil. Many of the voters only now realized that Norma Nolla had stood up for the right cause. As a result, her party gained a significant increase in votes and women were given more rights. Many injustices remain to this day, but without Norma Nolla, women would have a much harder time even to this day."

Jupiter scratched his head thoughtfully. "And why are you telling us all this?"

"Geez, Jupe!" Bob gave a desperate sigh. "Your weight loss treatment seems to be affecting your brain rather than your fat tissues. Where is your logical conclusion?"

"Perhaps he's just playing dumb because he's afraid to consider the most obvious possibility," Pete speculated provocatively.

"Would you please describe them to us?" Jupiter replied just as biting.

The Second Investigator didn't take long to respond. "Norma Nolla was accused of witchcraft by a bunch of lunatics and was burned at the stake in the recreation area where Jeremy, Bob and I also saw a witch. All right, I admit that this murder took place twenty years ago, but it is conceivable that the women's rights activist was resurrected as a witch to prevent the children from using the witch's mobile phone to contact the afterlife."

"That is ridiculous and at the same time lacks any logic," Jupiter contradicted the conviction. "Nevertheless, I would be willing to seriously pursue your train of thought if you could provide me with any real clue as to how Vanity Phone World could have managed to get hold of the key to the afterlife and hand it over to its mainly younger customers in return for a couple of bucks."

Perplexed, Pete's mouth remained open.

"In addition, I would like to point out that the owners of a witch's phone are charged very high fees." Jupiter could not be stopped. "Sending a text is almost twice as expensive with this model as with competing models. And the call charges are also far above normal rates. In addition, the minimum contract period when buying this mobile phone is set at two years. I think that most parents are not even aware of the costs involved when they buy this toy. I am

really sorry, Pete. I do not want to question the existence of the afterlife. But if access to another world really exists, Vanity Phone World certainly hasn't found it. Therefore, we should look for another explanation for the sudden appearance of this witch, who apparently doesn't like the idea of innocent children enjoying this newfangled toy."

"Makes sense, Jupe," Bob had to admit. "But, as absurd as Pete's theory sounds, his hunch is not entirely wrong."

The First Investigator restlessly stroked his belly, which made growling noises. "This hunger will kill me! I lack not only food, but also the necessary concentration. On what point can you agree with Pete's theory?"

"That the person who skilfully stages the whole magic with the witch show deliberately makes it look as if the deceased women's rights activist was behind the child kidnaps," Bob replied.

"What makes you say that?" Jupe asked.

"Remember Jeremy's words, fellas," Bob recalled. "He told us when the witch came to his cage and suddenly a strange male voice called out: 'Do you have his phone, Norma?'"

"Good gracious!" the Second Investigator burst out in horror. "Norma Nolla! I was right after all!"

Bob ignored Pete's remark. "My head was already spinning when Jeremy mentioned the name. After all, I knew the story of the suffragette, only I'd forgotten her name. But when I saw the newspaper reports on the Internet earlier, I knew for sure. It's certainly not a coincidence."

"I... I knew it..." Pete stammered. His hands began to shake uncontrollably. "We should heed the witch's warning and get out of this before it's too late!"

"On another point, however, I must take Jupe's side," Bob continued, unimpressed by Pete's warning. "I have evidence that the witch in question is not Norma Nolla... even if it appears to portray her."

Bob reached for the printed documents and pointed to the photo of a middle-aged woman. "Look at this." After Jupiter had studied the photo in detail, he passed it on to Pete.

"I don't know this person. Who is she?" Pete asked.

"It's Norma Nolla, Pete," Bob told him. "Notice her chubby cheeks, the full lips and the round shape of her face. What do you notice about her?"

"Well..." Pete replied with a hesitation. "The face of the witch we met looked very different."

"I'm glad you see that, Pete." The First Investigator tapped him on the shoulder with a conciliatory tone. "Even if the suffragette had undergone twenty diets in the afterlife, she would never look like the person who attacked us in the stairwell."

Bob got up from his chair and collected his papers. "I think we can all agree now to unmask the alleged witch and expose her true intentions, am I right?"

"I'm in!" Jupe said.

"Sure, Jupe," Bob noted. "What about you, Pete?"

Pete pressed his lips together out of tune. But finally he consented, sulking.

"Great, Pete!" Bob remarked. "As I understand Jupe, he has already come up with a precise plan of how we will proceed. Am I right?"

Jupiter nodded promisingly. "But before I come to that, I have to familiarize you with other details. I called Mrs Scott earlier and found out some interesting things." He paused for a moment of devotion and took a deep breath. "How surprised do you think she was after I told her about the e-mail and the resulting visit to the Moreland apartment? As was to be

expected, the father of the kidnapped Grace never contacted her at all. She only knew his name from the news.”

“Excuse me?” cried Pete in surprise. “Then how did he get our e-mail address and how did he even know we were investigating this case?”

“Mrs Scott could not explain it,” Jupe said. “She swore she hadn’t spoken of it to anyone outside her family.”

“Then she’s in on it!” Pete, aroused, jumped out of his chair. “She or any member of her family.”

Jupiter shook his head firmly. “I don’t believe it. Mrs Scott and the other family members reacted far too openly to our visit. Oh yes, Mrs Scott also told me that she sent us package by mail yesterday.”

“A package?” Pete was surprised. “What’s in it?”

“You don’t need three guesses, Pete,” the First Investigator tried to stir up the tension. “Jeremy was haunted by violent nightmares last night. He was bathed in sweat and babbled a lot of scary stuff—mostly about the witch’s phone. I think Mrs Scott was a little freaked out, so she took her son’s phone amidst strong protest, put it in a box and took it to the post office.”

“And what are we supposed to do with this expensive thing, Jupe?” Bob wanted to know.

“We will only hold it until Jeremy’s composure is restored. Then let him get it back. Unfortunately, she told him who she was addressing the package to. So she begged me, with the tongues of angels, to stand firm in case Jeremy came to us despite the ban, to get his beloved toy back.”

“Has Jeremy been questioned by the police yet?” Bob asked.

“Mrs Scott wanted to wait a few more days until his mental state had stabilized to some extent,” Jupiter said. “I advised her not to wait too long with this, because I think it would be useful for the police to get an exact description of the witch as soon as possible, so that they can search for her.”

The Second Investigator began nervously nibbling his fingernails. “Wouldn’t it be our duty to report as well? After all, we did run into that witch. That was after the police left us at the recreation area.”

“That is undoubtedly true, Pete,” Jupiter agreed. “But if we tell the police that we have had a run-in with the witch during our investigation, we will immediately have Jenny Collins and the whole press on our necks!”

“What makes you think so, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“Because they’re listening to the police radio, plain and simple!” Jupiter was overcome by an inner disturbance. “If the media gets wind of us, we can forget the case.”

Nevertheless, Pete was not easily convinced by Jupiter’s argument. “Three more children have been kidnapped! Don’t you think that withholding our information makes us liable to prosecution?”

“Why don’t you put one and one together, Pete,” the First Investigator tried to counter Pete’s argument. “If we share our knowledge with the police, and therefore also with the press, there is a high probability that the witch will take revenge on us. Moreover, Jeremy and the other missing children, who will certainly turn up soon, will tell us soon enough what happened to them during the kidnapping. So where do you see the need to call the police?”

Pete began to falter. “What if the missing children aren’t released so quickly after all? What then?”

“Two days,” Jupiter said. “Give ourselves two days!”

Plagued by remorse, Pete finally agreed. "All right. I'm just wondering what you expect to get out of this reprieve. Do you really think you can solve the case in that time frame? What do you have in mind? Are you going to search the recreation area as we discussed?"

"Change of priorities. Let the police deal with that." The First Investigator took a peek at the wall calendar over the sink. "We are holding on to our plan to visit Vanity Phone World on Monday."

"We won't be the first to do that after Jenny Collins's TV report," Bob said. "Do you really think we're gonna get anything conclusive under these conditions?"

Jupiter was confident. "The press can go fly kites, fellas. I prefer to take the direct path."

"And where does this go?" Bob asked.

Jupiter grinned superiorly. "Straight to the boss's office tomorrow!"

12. Pushy Approach

Vanity Phone World was located in the heart of West Hollywood. The twelve-storey building had been built only last year and it had already made a swanky impression from the outside. The entire front side was glazed in gold, so that the opposite building, a modern cineplex, was reflected in it.

It was Monday. The Three Investigators arrived by bicycle at the front of the mobile phone company's building. They saw a teeming horde of angry journalists, reporters, TV crews and onlookers gathered at the entrance area of the building.

"I really didn't expect that many people," Pete said in astonishment. "Phew... let me catch my breath for a minute..."

The First Investigator was sweating profusely. He vowed to leave his bicycle in the shed in future, despite having lost his bet, and to fall back on the more comfortable means of transport.

"It seems that Vanity Phone World has decided to hold a press conference," Bob replied. "It's almost three o'clock. I suspect the crowd of people will be let into the conference room in a few minutes."

Pete twisted his neck to get a better view. "Have either of you seen Jenny Collins yet? I can't see her anywhere."

Bob stood on his toes. "There she is, Pete! She is standing with her cameraman directly in front of the entrance and seems to be already on air. She is already talking into her microphone! And over there, is Mr Jordan—the reporter from *Washington Globe Magazine*."

"Let's not worry about the sensationalist pack, fellas," the First Investigator said after his short breather. "They would only be fed with empty promises anyway. We will proceed more cleverly."

In the process, he tampered with the backpack that Pete had shouldered and pulled out Mrs Scott's tied up parcel, which had arrived at Headquarters earlier that morning.

"Let's go, fellas!" Jupiter quipped.

Bob and Pete followed Jupiter, who headed purposefully towards the building. With his head held high, without paying attention to the individual journalists, he pushed his way through the crowd, opened the glazed entrance door and went to the reception desk with his friends. Behind it, an elderly gentleman was sitting on a swivel chair. "I must ask you to wait outside for a few more minutes," he admonished The Three Investigators politely but firmly.

"My dear man!" Jupiter played the ignorant and pointed behind him. "Will Michael Jackson appear here, or what are they all waiting for?"

The fine gentleman wrinkled his nose. "A press conference," he replied curtly. "... In a few minutes. Aren't you from the newspaper?" He squinted curiously at the package in Jupiter's hands.

Jupiter shook his head. "We're supposed to turn this in here." He tapped the package with his finger and smiled to uncover the top row of his teeth. "We're from the courier service and are to deliver it to the secretary."

"Mrs Fancy?" The gentleman plucked a piece of lint from his jacket with pointed fingers.

The First Investigator took a quick look at the address label of the parcel. "So it is." And he did it so deftly that the person across the counter couldn't see it. "Can you please tell us the floor and room number?"

Suspiciously the master looked over the counter. "You can leave the package with me. I will give it to Mrs Fancy."

"I'm sorry, sir," Jupiter replied insistently. "We were told to deliver it to her personally."

"Without consultation, I cannot let you pass. It's against regulations." The gentleman decided to pick up the phone and press a few buttons. Pete and Bob knew that Jupiter's thinking apparatus was rotating at its highest level during those seconds. So they kept to themselves discreetly in the background. "The line is busy." Elegantly, the man put down the phone. "You'll have to wait."

Suddenly the front door was pushed open. Jenny Collins, accompanied by her cameraman, entered the reception hall and approached the counter with clacking boot heels. Jupiter instinctively took a step back. "Got me in the viewfinder, Larry?"

The reporter positioned herself in front of the camera, which her assistant held on his shoulder, and reached for her microphone on his signal. "I am here in the lobby of Vanity Phone World, a company that is likely to be facing criminal charges, the background to which we will learn more about shortly. The press conference will begin in a few minutes. I will use this time to ask the gentleman here at the reception some questions first." Jenny Collins turned to the side. "Hold on, Larry!" she hissed at her cameraman.

"Leave the building immediately." The gentleman, surprisingly fast for his age, shot out from behind the counter suddenly, and held his right palm directly in front of the camera lens. "You and your station have never understood anything about serious reporting! I will advise our press department to exclude you from the conference."

But the reporter never dreamed of clearing the field. "I will not be shaken off so easily! You can call the police." She crossed her arms demonstratively. "I'll wait for them in this spot and record everything with my camera!"

The present situation seemed to the First Investigator to be extremely favourable. He approached the angry gentleman with a clear throat.

"Excuse me, sir, but our boss gets really annoyed if we're late. He also said that Mrs Fancy—"

"What?" Involuntarily, the gentleman drove around. He seemed to have completely forgotten about The Three Investigators. "The package? Oh, yeah, the... Room 615, sixth floor." He turned back to Miss Collins.

Quickly Jupiter, Pete and Bob hurried into the already opened lift cabin. When the doors closed behind them, they breathed a sigh of relief.

"You have more luck than sense," Pete whispered to Jupiter. "That might mean something to a mastermind like you."

The First Investigator did not listen at all and obsessively pinched his lower lip. Soon, the lift reached its destination, and the doors swung open to reveal a long, brightly-lit hallway.

"The executive floor..." Pete was in awe. "We've made it this far, Jupe."

When The Three Investigators got out of the lift, there was no one but them. The soft, dove-blue carpet swallowed every step they took. Jupiter stopped in front of a door, and under the room number was a metal plate with the name 'Bob Acer'.

"Your namesake," Jupiter whispered into his friend's ear. Then he knocked.

"Yes, please?" a hoarse voice came through the door. The First Investigator pushed the handle down and entered with his friends. In the sparse but luxuriously furnished antechamber, two secretaries were sitting in front of their monitors. They were busy typing.

“Can I help you?” One of the women stood up behind her desk and looked questioningly at the three boys over her rimless reading glasses.

“Sorry to disturb you. My name is Jupiter Jones and these are my friends Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. We’d like to have a quick word with Mr Acer. I wonder if he could spare us two minutes.”

The secretary threw an irritated glance at her diary. “You don’t have an appointment, is that correct?”

“Who are you?” a sharp voice suddenly rang out behind Jupiter. Startled, the First Investigator turned around. In the door frame to the hallway appeared a tall, corpulent man with a light hairline. “What are these boys doing here, Mrs Fancy?”

“Are you Mr Acer, the head of Vanity Phone World?” The First Investigator reached out to the man. “My name is Jupiter Jones and I would like to speak to you personally.” Pete found the situation extremely unpleasant. He avoided direct eye contact with Mr Acer and instead looked over to the other secretary who had long blonde hair. With her back to them, she stared intently at the monitor and took not the slightest notice of those present.

“What’s this all about?” the head of the mobile phone company asked brusquely.

Jupiter pointed to the parcel in his hands. “About the witch’s phone. It’s in there. May I unpack it for a moment?”

“I don’t have time for this,” Mr Acer said. “What is it about?”

“Receiving of text messages,” Jupiter explained calmly. “How is it possible that the sender can remain anonymous? I sent the witch’s mobile phone in for repair and received it back today by mail. The seller told me that he—”

“For such a trivial matter, you dare to steal my time?” Mr Acer spoke unkindly to him. “Who let you in here, anyway? Leave this building immediately or I’ll report you for trespassing.”

Jupiter did not want to admit defeat so easily. “But listen, Mr...”

“Out!” The man’s face took on a reddish tinge. He pushed The Three Investigators out into the corridor and slammed the door behind them.

Jupiter clenched his teeth bitterly. “Well, fellas, I hate to admit it, but that action was a complete disaster.” He walked towards the lift with sloping shoulders and pressed the button in resignation.

“Never mind, Jupe,” Bob tried to find words of comfort to his friend. “Experience, good or bad, is priceless.”

“We know Jupe has a hard time processing failures,” Pete said quietly. “I don’t think he realizes that our visit to Mr Acer’s office was an absolute success!”

The First Investigator gave a heavy sigh. “You can keep your scorn to yourself, Pete.” Pete didn’t let himself be put off. “Haven’t you noticed?”

Bob listened with interest. “Well, what is it?”

The Second Investigator whispered so softly that he could hardly be understood. “You remember the witch whose face I scratched?” he pointed carefully to the door of the office. “She’s in there!”

13. Monique Carrera

“What?” Jupiter thought he heard wrong. “You must be joking!”

“Do I look like I’m joking? I almost thought I was gonna get hit. One of the secretaries has a long scratch on her right cheek!”

Bob took a critical look at Pete. “You don’t mean Mrs Fancy? Her face was completely intact.”

“Not her!” Pete hissed. “The other one—the one with the blonde hair!”

“How could you have seen her face when she had her back to us all the time?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“That’s why I noticed it,” Pete explained emphatically. He couldn’t stand it if Bob and Jupiter doubted his observations. “She stared at the monitor with such fervour, as if she was desperately trying to hide something. Suddenly the sun’s rays burst out from behind a cloud cover and illuminated the room. Didn’t you see it?”

“See what?” Jupiter impatiently urged. “I don’t remember her turning around.”

“For a brief moment, her face was reflected on the screen’s pane! I could clearly see the finger-length scratch!”

The First Investigator was about to start a question when a door opened beside them and a person stepped out of it. She was balancing on her hands a mountain of files so high that it obviously blocked her view.

“Look out!” Bob exclaimed. The lady almost collided with The Three Investigators if Bob hadn’t warn them at the last second. Nevertheless, the files slipped out of her hands during the evasive manoeuvre and fell to the ground rumbling.

“Hello?” wondered the lady. “I haven’t seen you here before. Are you the new interns?” She was about to bend over for the files, but The Three Investigators were quicker.

“Where should they go?” Jupiter enquired charmingly after he had picked up the files with his friends. “We’ll fulfil your every wish.”

The middle-aged woman plucked her beige costume into shape. “To the seventh floor archive. Have you pressed the lift button yet?”

The question was unnecessary, because at the same moment, the doors slid to the side. The lady scurried into the cabin with a light foot and tapped the lift button when the boys had entered.

“Three gentlemen at once to help me,” she remarked with a smile.

Jupiter was embarrassed, but he sensed a chance to make new enquiries. When the cabin on the next floor opened, the lady hurried into the corridor, opened a nearby door and pointed to a spacious desk.

“You can put the files there. I can do the rest myself.”

Jupiter beamed at her in admiration. “You are the friendliest staff member we have dealt with in this company so far. You should be given a seat in Mr Acer’s office. Instead, the post has been filled by a dragon.”

“You’re talking about Miss Carrera,” she guessed with a strange undertone.

“I meant Mrs Fancy,” Jupiter replied cleverly. “But her blonde colleague with the striking hair seems to be of a similar calibre.”

“An attractive appearance, I’ll give Miss Carrera credit for that.” She gave a sneering grin as if she was unable to contain herself when she made that remark. “But behind that beautiful façade, an abyss opens up. The diva would be better off in a cabaret than in a respectable company like Vanity Phone World, which has a worldwide reputation.”

Pete had difficulty understanding the daring hints. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t believe it myself, but Mrs Thompson, a colleague who is new here, is one hundred percent sure. There is no mistake!”

The First Investigator was seized by an inner excitement. “What is your point, if I may ask?”

With an almost youthful giggle, she held her hand in front of her mouth. “I am almost embarrassed to divulge secrets, but Mrs Thompson is already spreading this sensational news on every floor. In that case, I have no qualms about telling you, too.”

“You’re making it exciting,” Bob had to admit. “We’re bursting with curiosity. Let’s hear it.”

Before the lady responded, she pulled a silver case out of her pocket and took out a cigarette, which she lighted it up with relish. “I was sitting with Mrs Thompson in the canteen earlier today, having coffee and cake, when my new colleague kicked me slightly under the table and pointed inconspicuously to the next table. There, this Miss Carrera was enthroned between some male employees and enjoyed their unrestricted attention as usual. By the way, her first name is Monique.”

She blew the blue smoke into the air. “Mrs Thompson did not seem to believe her eyes. She impulsively jumped out of her chair and rushed towards them, beaming with joy. ‘Is that you, Michael? I don’t believe it!’ She shouted so loud that it could be heard across the tables. ‘Michael Chandler! What a surprise! How long has it been since we’ve seen each other?’”

“Michael Chandler?” Bob repeated in disbelief. “How can this be understood?”

With a big gesture, the lady pulled out her cigarette. “This question was certainly wondered by everyone present there at that moment, with the exception of Miss Carrera, of course, who pretended to be deaf. But Mrs Thompson was not satisfied with that. She cried euphorically: ‘Don’t you remember me? It’s me, Jamie, your old friend! Congratulations! Your dream has come true. Boy, that operation couldn’t have been cheap. You’re so beautiful. You’re a beautiful woman. But you still have the same eyes. That’s how I recognized you. I already knew then that you never felt comfortable in a man’s skin!’”

Bob no longer understood the world. “What... what did Mrs Thompson mean by that?”

The lady reacted with exaggerated astonishment. “I’m very surprised. Haven’t you understood yet?”

The First Investigator looked her straight in the eye. “I can explain that. According to Mrs Thompson, Monique Carrera was born a man who, as he grew up, felt an increasing desire to be a woman. Michael Chandler has therefore become the attractive Miss Carrera.”

The lady uttered a scornful sound. “You got it!”

“How did Miss Carrera react to the reunion with Mrs Thompson?” Pete asked interested.

“It was only through iron self-discipline that she managed to keep her composure.” The lady vigorously put her cigarette out in the ashtray. “This exaggeratedly made-up man in a lady’s dress tried to talk his way out. ‘There must be some mistake,’ he said, but his secret was blown. Suddenly it was also clear to all of us why Miss Carrera had such an abysmal, smoky voice. In any case, he immediately left the canteen.”

“We saw Miss Carrera just a few minutes ago in Mr Acer’s office,” the First Investigator told the lady who was eager to give them information. “There she sat in front of the monitor and seemed to be concentrating on her work.”

“I can imagine that,” she replied pointedly.

“She will know that with this revelation, her days at Vanity Phone World are numbered. I know Mr Acer very well. He will not tolerate having such shady characters representing his company in public.”

Jupiter noticed that the lady slowly became restless and wanted to return to her original workplace. But before that, he had to find out one more important thing.

“Do you have any idea where Miss, uh, Carrera got that long scratch on her cheek?”

“I asked her about it first thing this morning when I met her in the canteen during breakfast break and saw this unattractive deformity on her face from a distance.” The lady’s eyes flashed suspiciously. “Apparently, she was hurt by her cat the past weekend. She claimed that her cat accidentally scratched her while they were playing together!”

After The Three Investigators had said goodbye to the talkative lady and reached the ground floor again by lift, Jupiter immediately took the floor. “For your excellent powers of observation, you deserve an extra medal, Pete. If the compulsory diet I was on hadn’t had such a negative effect on my thinking, Miss Carrera’s—that is Michael Chandler’s—scratch in the monitor’s reflection would certainly have caught my eye before you did. But this hunger seems to have taken the last bit of sanity out of me.”

“Sheesh!” Pete quipped. “That’s typical for you to say that.”

“Do you think it would be worth trying to sneak into the press conference that’s going on right now?” Bob made a new proposal to his friends.

The First Investigator did not think much of this idea. “The risk of getting caught would be too great. Mr Acer will be there, I’m sure. We don’t necessarily have to bump into him a second time. If he finds out we’re investigating the kidnappings, he could get in our way. No, we’ll keep a low profile and focus exclusively on Miss Carrera.”

Instead of the earlier fine gentleman at the counter, a young man, obviously his substitute for the breaks, now sat at the reception. The Three Investigators smiled at him in passing and left the building.

Determined, Pete wanted to head for their bikes, but Jupiter held him back energetically. “May I ask what you are up to, Pete?”

“It’s obvious,” Pete replied. “Go back to Headquarters to discuss our next steps.”

“Wrong. From now on, we can’t let the suspects out of our sight, and we will look for a suitable observation post within sight.”

Jupiter took a look at the buildings across the street. There he seemed to have discovered a suitable place. “Follow me, fellas!”

Through the pedestrian lights, the First Investigator led his friends to a Chinese restaurant, which was located right next to the cineplex. ‘Beijing’ was written in pseudo-Chinese letters on a flashing illuminated sign, which the operator had already switched on.

“If you imagine that you can fill your stomach in the midst of our investigation,” joked Pete, “then you’re wound up crooked! Iron discipline is the basic prerequisite for a successful diet. Take it from an athlete.”

Before Jupiter passed the entrance, he stopped abruptly and raised his index finger in a warning. “All right, I bow to your request. But only under one condition.”

“What’s that?” Bob enquired with a firm resolution not to be taken in.

“If I’m not allowed to eat in here, you have to promise to hold back too. Anything else would be mental cruelty.”

Pete did not succeed in suppressing a grin. "If that's your biggest concern at the moment, Chubby, I give you my word—all or none."

"So none," Bob backed up the deal and opened the front door.

The restaurant was only sparsely occupied, most tables were still free. Jupiter pushed his way past Bob and chose a suitable seat at the window. From here, the whole entrance area of the mobile phone company could be seen very well.

Pete slipped onto a corner seat and looked around the restaurant with interest. "Great place, guys! We even have a TV here if we get bored." He pointed to a monitor that was installed on a wall bracket above the jukebox.

The Three Investigators had barely taken their seats when a waiter approached them and handed them the menus with a polite bow. While Pete and Bob leafed through them, Jupiter took over the observation of the building opposite.

"What do you say we have jasmine tea?" asked the Second Investigator. Bob agreed to the proposal and Jupiter also agreed reluctantly.

After they had placed their order, the First Investigator proceeded to discuss their current case. "I can already put the facts together. Everything indicates that Vanity Phone World had the missing children kidnapped by a witch in order to increase the sale of the witch's mobile phones.

"As we can see, it seems to be working out. The press and television are taking up the issue enthusiastically and are like starving vultures circling over the food they have found."

Amused, Bob and Pete noticed that Jupiter's stomach was making growling sounds when he made this statement. The First Investigator was about to continue with his summary when Pete suddenly pointed to the TV.

"*Network TV* is broadcasting news!" Loudly, he drew the waiter's attention to himself. "Excuse me, sir, could you please turn up the volume for a moment?"

Pete was promptly granted this wish. With alertness, The Three Investigators looked at the screen. Child kidnaps seemed to be the main topic at the time.

"In the kidnap case of the three missing children in the greater Los Angeles area, there has been a surprising turn of events since noon today. Around 1 pm in the woods of the National Recreation Area in Santa Monica, two of the kidnapped children were found by a forest ranger. They had been kept in a cage for two days. They are ten-year-old Grace Moreland from Venice and nine-year-old Alan Baker from Santa Barbara. Both children are unharmed and are already back in the familiar surroundings of their family. Still missing is the eleven-year-old Pete Crowning from Anaheim."

"The many inconsistencies seem to indicate that the child kidnaps are the result of a strategically planned advertising campaign by the internationally known mobile phone company Vanity Phone World. For more information, we go to our reporter Jenny Collins, who is currently live in the company's headquarters."

"That's something!" Bob almost burned his lips on the hot tea with excitement.

In spite of the captivating news on the screen, Jupiter took a searching look at the opposite building at short intervals.

"This is Jenny Collins from *Network TV*," the reporter appeared on the screen. "The suspicion that the children were kidnapped for Vanity Phone World is growing. They were all in possession of a witch's phone, a mobile phone with a creepy and hilarious design specifically made for growing kids. How else can it be explained that ten-year-old Grace Moreland, and nine-year-old Alan Baker, independently of each other, were lured by text messages on their witch's phone to a deserted place and were attacked by a witch there?"

“Yes, viewers, you heard right. The two children stated that they were suddenly confronted by a witch. The witch’s physical appearance seems to be similar to that of the late actress Margaret Hamilton in her role as the Wicked Witch of the West in the musical *The Wizard of Oz*. The children were chloroformed by her, locked in a cage and abandoned in the forests of the National Recreation Area in Santa Monica.

“Vanity Phone World is outraged at any suspicion of being behind these kidnappings. A few minutes ago, *Network TV* managed to corner the managing director of the company, Bob Acer, with some questions.”

After a quick change of scene, the face of the obviously tense Mr Acer appeared on the screen. The pushy Jenny Collins held the microphone in front of his mouth.

“Mr Acer, at the press conference a few minutes ago, assured the media that Vanity Phone World has nothing to do with the child kidnaps.”

The head of the company nodded. “That’s what I did, because it’s undoubtedly correct.”

“But you can’t quite get your head out of the noose,” the quick-witted reporter emphatically contradicted. “Because after the children disappeared, your mobile phones were found at the kidnap site. It was always the same model—the witch’s phone from Vanity Phone World. How do you explain this?”

For a fraction of a second, the First Investigator thought he noticed a hint of scorn in Mr Acer’s eyes, but he wasn’t quite sure.

“This is as much a mystery to me as it is to everyone else,” he admitted sheepishly. “But the groundless accusations of the media lack any logic, since you can surely imagine that the unpleasant incidents concerning our product are already having a negative effect on sales.”

But Jenny Collins did not let up. “The FBI is convinced that the traces in the child kidnap cases lead inevitably to Vanity Phone World, because the kidnapper was in possession of the corresponding mobile phone numbers, without which it would not have been possible to contact the young victims via text messages. Although these numbers are also known to the sellers, as they give them to the customers when they sell a mobile phone, it has already been determined that the said witch’s phones were purchased by the parents in different parts of the city. Therefore, it is almost impossible that the perpetrator could have obtained his information from various sellers. Therefore, it is inevitable that the kidnapper could only get the private information of his victims from Vanity Phone World.”

Mr Acer’s uncontrollably flared-up. “This is all conjecture and there is no concrete evidence to support it.”

“Nevertheless, information has been passed on to us which clearly indicates that a court order prohibits you from further selling the witch’s phones until the motive for the kidnaps is clearly established.”

Mr Acer was not giving any further comment. Jenny Collins used that moment to launch another attack. “I cannot believe what you are saying, Mr Acer. According to research by *Network TV*, sales of the witch’s phones have sky-rocketed in the last few hours due to the media coverage of the child kidnaps.”

After this statement, Mr Acer flung a diabolical grin across his face.

14. Ambush Attack

“Is it all right with the gentlemen if I turn the sound down again?” the waiter asked after Jenny Collins’s presentation was completed. Meanwhile, *Network TV* reported exclusively on a reception at the White House.

“No problem, sir!” Jupiter said thankfully to him.

Bob sipped his tea again. “It looks like Vanity Phone World has a pretty tough time evading the suspicions of his company being involved. Also, Mr Acer doesn’t seem to care in the slightest that the kidnapped children are exposed to severe psychological stress... as long as it’s ringing in the till.”

“We are very close to the point, fellas,” rejoiced the First Investigator. “I’m quite sure that Mr—or Miss—Carrera will make the final and crucial mistake today.”

“And what will that be?” Pete wanted to know.

Jupiter peered over to the building opposite.

“Pete Crowning, the fourth kidnap victim, is still in captivity. It is believed that he, too, was subjected to the ordeal of seeing a predator cage from the inside, and is believed to still be in a secluded wooded area.”

“In the woods where Norma Nolla died,” Bob said, “where we came across Jeremy’s bag and where the other missing children were put in a cage!”

Pete clicked his tongue. “Then I think we should give the FBI a hint right away. The area must be combed thoroughly. The three of us can do nothing.”

“Do you really think that the mastermind behind these kidnappings are stupid enough to choose the same place this time too? You can be sure that the area in question is already under large-scale surveillance. I also think I know why the witch’s phones are always left behind at the crime scene.”

“Of course!” Pete clicked his tongue. “It was the only way the media could make a connection with Vanity Phone World.”

“Right, Pete,” replied Jupiter. “But I assume that there is another intention behind this. As long as a mobile phone is switched on, the police are able to determine its location. In this way, they have already successfully put a stop to criminal activities on many occasions!”

“Well, what do you suggest we do now, Jupe?” Bob asked.

“What I have already mentioned it, Bob,” Jupiter replied indignantly. “But you keep interrupting me!”

Pete patted Jupiter’s hand exaggeratedly. “You have our undivided attention.”

“We stick to our plan and wait here until Carrera leaves the building. I suspect that the witch will take action today as soon as darkness falls. We will follow her lead and wait for an opportunity to put an end to this foul spell once and for all.”

Bob agreed enthusiastically. “That sounds like night-time action again! But I have to be home by eleven at the latest. After all, we have school tomorrow.”

“With any luck, the mystery of witch’s phone will be solved by then,” Jupiter said confidently. “How about you, Pete?”

“I’m keeping my end of the bargain—all or none!” Pete replied. “Needless to say, I’d rather stay at home than go back to work.”

“May I serve you some more?” The waiter came up to the boys’ table and looked at them questioningly.

“What do you think?” Bob asked his friends. “Can we have another cup of tea?” Pete and Jupiter agreed.

The waiter moved the corners of his mouth. “While I am uncomfortable, I must inform you that you are here in a restaurant.”

Pete looked at him in astonishment. “We know that already. Is there any problem?”

“Well...” the waiter was looking for the right words. “In a restaurant, people usually eat. This is not a café. We only have a limited number of tables, and as you can see, more and more guests are coming here to enjoy our delicious meals.”

“Does that mean that we have to clear our place if we don’t order food?” Pete summed it up.

“I’m afraid so,” the waiter confirmed with a nod. The Second Investigator already reached for his jacket. “Then please bring us the bill.”

“Just a moment!” Jupiter immediately objected. “We have to discuss this first!”

Pete thought he heard wrong. “There’s nothing to discuss, Chubby! We made a clear agreement, and we’ll stick to it.”

“Slow down, take it easy.” Jupiter pointed promisingly out the window. “I chose this restaurant not for our pleasure, but because it is the only place from which the entrance to Vanity Phone World can be observed unnoticed. But if we are hanging around next door in front of the cineplex, it is much too conspicuous. I still stand by my lost bet, but in this case the detective work comes first. So if the waiter forces us to our knees, I unfortunately see no other way out than to follow his demand. And since the motto you mentioned is ‘all or none’, Pete, I suggest strengthening ourselves before the planned night shift and I’ll postpone my diet to a later date.”

He smiled kindly at the waiter. “Please bring us the menu. We are very curious to see what your kitchen has to offer us!”

Pete lacked the necessary counter-arguments at this moment and Bob also stopped his mouth opening in surprise.

“Now don’t stare at me as if I had committed a crime,” Jupiter began to justify his autocratic actions. “You can’t have failed to notice how my thinking has been affected by the lack of food. Without nourishment, we will not be able to get through the next few hours successfully, I guarantee it.”

“All right, Jupe,” Pete conceded. “But I’m going to make one clear condition.”

“And what is that?”

Pete took the menu from the waiter, leafed through it and after a short search, he tapped on a certain column. “For you, the only possible order is number thirty-three.”

Interested, Jupiter looked at the menu and involuntarily pulled a face. “Vegetable stew with rice? You can’t be serious!”

“You bet,” Pete replied with a stern undertone. “And so that you don’t constantly look enviously at Bob and me at dinner, we’ll all order the same thing for reasons of solidarity, won’t we, Bob?”

Bob nodded benevolently. “Needless to say, it’s all or none.”

Jupiter finally surrendered and after they had placed their order, he set about opening Mrs Scott’s package. Meanwhile, Bob took over the observation from the window.

Jeremy’s mother had packed her son’s witch’s phone in crushed paper as a precaution. However, she had forgotten to switch it off and had not enclosed a note with the package. Only the mobile phone and the charger were inside.

“This mobile phone seems to stick to us like an evil curse,” Pete remarked. “I can’t stand this thing!”

“There is nothing unusual about this witch’s phone, apart from its somewhat unusual features, Pete,” said Jupiter. “Everything else is man-made magic. You can take it with a clear conscience.”

Reluctantly, Pete grabbed the mobile phone and inspected it suspiciously from all sides. Suddenly he cried out in horror! A painful electric shock had hit him in the hand. Reflexively, he dropped the witch’s phone on the table and jumped up in horror. “That thing gave me a shock! It’s life-threatening!”

Jupiter paid little attention to Pete’s excitement. Instead, he grabbed the mobile phone with a quick movement and blew a surprised whistle.

“Fellas! Someone sent us a text message!”

With trembling hands, Jupiter pressed the keys several times.

“Go ahead and read it,” Bob urged impatiently. “Who is it from?”

“Listen to this: ‘To The Three Investigators. My mother has forbidden me to contact you, but I must speak to you urgently. Come to Milton Primary School at 6 pm. I’ll wait for you outside the gym. I know who the witch is. Jeremy.’”

Jupiter passed the witch’s phone to Bob.

“What does he mean by that?” asked Pete, who could still feel the effects of the electric shock.

“You will receive an answer to this question at 6 pm,” Jupiter said.

Pete became suspicious. “And why me?”

The First Investigator kept taking a look across the street. “Because you’re the most athletic of us and the fastest way to get to Milton Primary School is by bike. Besides, it can only be in your best interest if Bob and I take care of the witch while you go meet Jeremy. But if you refuse, Bob can go to Milton Primary School.”

Pete thankfully waved him away. “Thanks for giving me an option, Jupe. But I’d rather choose the lesser of two evils. How do we stay in contact? Do we have the number of that mobile phone?” he pointed to the witch’s phone.

“Mrs Scott did not tell us. There hasn’t been any reason for her to do so.” Thoughtfully, Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “We don’t need this mobile phone, fellas. As soon as Bob and I know the exact location where Carrera is, we will call Headquarters and leave a message on our answering machine. Pete, you then can access the message remotely.”

Jupiter was referring to the remote access feature of their answering machine. Pete could use any push-button phone to call in and key in a password to allow him to listen to the recorded messages.

“You can join us as soon as your meeting with Jeremy is over,” Jupe added.

As the waiter served The Three Investigators the ‘vegetable stew with rice’, Jupiter fervently hoped that Miss Carrera would not leave the Vanity Phone World building until the food had landed completely in his stomach. Hungry, he gobbled down the food as if he was competing for the world record for eating. Only when he had picked up the last slice of carrot with his fork and put it in his mouth did his inner peace return.

With pleasure, he stroked his full belly and took a quick look at the hands of his watch. It was exactly 5:12 pm. “That was a relief, fellas. I finally feel like a human being again. You can’t imagine how much I—”

A sudden twitch drove the First Investigator into his limbs.

“What is it, Jupe?” Pete asked himself, although he already suspected the answer.

Jupiter jumped from his chair as if stung by a tarantula and frantically reached for his jacket. "Hurry up, Bob! This is it. Miss Carrera's leaving the building! Do you have enough money on you to pay for our meals, Pete?"

"No problem," he shouted to his friends after quickly checking the contents of his wallet. But the two had already left the restaurant.

Through the window, the Second Investigator could watch the secretary with the long blonde hair walk up to a taxi stand, got into one of them and went off in it. Jupiter and Bob jumped into the next taxi and started the chase.

The taxi driver didn't seem to care in the least why the First Investigator had told him to follow Miss Carrera's taxi at a safe distance. He did not ask any uncomfortable questions when Jupiter asked him to cross an intersection quickly, although the traffic light was already changing to red. Without any objection, the driver followed Jupiter's request and did not let the other vehicle out of his sight.

"Do you already have a vague idea where this joyride will take us," he asked with a wry grin.

"Sorry, we're gonna have to pass," was Bob's honest answer. "But don't worry, we've got enough money on us."

Suddenly the taxi in front stopped abruptly at the edge of the road. There were no houses or buildings in sight. On both sides of the highway there were only long rows of palm trees on a hilly landscape.

"Stop the car," Jupiter said aloud. The driver immediately stepped on the brake pedal and stopped his car about twenty metres behind the other taxi.

At this moment, Miss Carrera got out of the taxi and with quick steps, approached the taxi in which Bob and Jupiter were in.

The First Investigator frowned questioningly. "What is the meaning of this?"

With a firm grip, the blonde beauty opened the rear taxi door. "Move over," she asked the two boys in a deep voice. "Then I can sit with you."

Jupiter and Bob were at a loss for words. Without argument, they gave way to Miss Carrera.

"So you threw yourselves into this taxi and followed me," she turned to the two detectives after joining them in the back seat. "Apparently you were given the assignment of tailing me. If that is the case, we can go in the same taxi. At least you'll save on the fare!"

Slowly it was getting cooler outside. Pete pulled the zip of his thin jacket all the way up. He stood in a wind-protected corner in front of the gymnasium on the deserted grounds of Milton Primary School and kept looking for Jeremy. It was already 6:12 pm. Jeremy should have been here by now.

Restlessly, the Second Investigator stepped from one leg to the other. He hated waiting. Nervously, he drummed his fingers on the witch's mobile phone, which was in the left pocket of his denim jacket. He didn't want to have this thing with him, but Bob and Jupiter had left it on the table during their hasty departure from the Chinese restaurant.

Suddenly a strange suspicion came over him. Hadn't Mrs Scott specifically warned that Jeremy would pull out all the stops to get his beloved witch's phone back? Perhaps he had no information at all concerning the witch, and the text message had only been a pretext.

The Second Investigator stepped out of the alcove and let his eyes wander over the school grounds searching. At that moment, a thunderous bang sounded behind his back! Pete

turned around frightened and stopped rooted to the ground. He couldn't believe his eyes, and yet he knew it wasn't a delusion.

Wrapped in a thick cloud of smoke, the witch stood before him! Angrily she swung her broom and looked at him hatefully with bloodshot eyes.

15. Single Combat

The thickly applied powder, the dark red lipstick and the green eyelids with the glued-on eyelashes made Miss Carrera's face look like a mask. Only the long scrape on her cheek did not match her glamorous appearance. A cloud of perfume spread throughout the taxi.

"Where do you want to go, ma'am?" the taxi driver asked in a charming and courteous manner.

Miss Carrera tried to smile. "To Roosevelt Street. Number four."

"No problem."

After the taxi had started off, Bob cleared his throat. "It's a bit awkward, but could I ask you how you came to think that somebody asked us to follow you? Because we didn't." Bob received a blow to the side from Jupiter.

"Oh no?" Miss Carrera questioned with a critical look. "Then how come your friend's giving you a shot?"

The First Investigator winced. "Well done, ma'am, you are observant!"

"And not stupid," she replied dryly. "So don't stall and enlighten me on what game is in progress."

"All right." Jupiter looked her straight in the eye. "But don't you think this is an extremely inappropriate place to discuss this?"

"I have nothing to hide." Miss Carrera took out a pair of dark sunglasses from her handbag and put them on. "Still, you shouldn't stare at a lady so much. It's not proper."

The First Investigator averted his gaze in disquiet. "Excuse me, ma'am. I did not mean to offend you."

The taxi driver clicked the turn signal and reduced the speed. "Hate to interrupt your interesting conversation, but we are here at your destination—number four, Roosevelt Street." He pointed to the meter. "That'll be exactly fourteen dollars. Are you two getting off here, or do you want to continue the tour?"

Miss Carrera pulled a fifty dollar bill out of the pocket of her leopard print jacket. "The gentlemen will be getting off with me," she said.

"We'll cover the costs," Bob beat her to it, opened his wallet and paid the driver. Shortly afterwards, he got out of the taxi with Jupiter and Miss Carrera.

"Let's go to my apartment. And we can discuss everything." The secretary pointed to a two-storey apartment building painted light pink. "Follow me."

When Jupiter and Bob hesitated briefly, she raised her sunglasses and looked at the two boys piercingly. "What's wrong with you?" she asked in a deep voice. "Surely a woman can't hurt you..."

"Why did you come alone?" croaked the witch in a husky voice. "Where are your friends?" She approached threateningly.

Following his instinct, Pete anxiously retreated into the alcove. He noticed too late that he had reached a dead end from which there was no escape route.

"Answer me!"

The Second Investigator wanted to reply, but his throat was dry. This reaction gave the witch a feeling of power and superiority.

“You disregarded my warning and didn’t take it seriously!” she raved. “Now the time for retribution has come.” She almost touched his nose with her long index finger. “And you... will be the next on my list. Death has already reached out its cold hand to you...”

“But... but why?” Pete looked questioningly into the witch’s narrow, green face and tried to find traces of the scratch he had inflicted on her three days ago. But through the thick smoke that poured out from under her black robe and covered her whole figure in a white mist, nothing precise could be seen.

“It’s too late to ask questions.” A vicious laugh underlined their intention. “You will suffer agony and be allowed to make personal contact with the devil.” She licked her lips. “Slowly and painfully he will loosen your tongue...”

During this performance, Pete was bathed in cold sweat and suddenly only one thought dominated his mind—escape! He had to escape the witch, who was obviously ready for anything and was already eagerly rubbing her claw hands, somehow.

“If you dare to fool me, you’ll get the short end of the stick, laddie. Never provoke the forces of evil!”

At that very moment, the Second Investigator gathered all his courage, pushed his head forward and shot at the witch with determination and aggressiveness! But he had not expected her quick reaction. Obeying an inner reflex, she jumped to the side with a skilful leap and quickly pushed the end of her broomstick between his legs, so that his body hit the hard pavement. He was close to fainting. But the well-trained athlete did not give up yet.

He took a deep breath once, rolled onto his back, grabbed the witch by her ankle and pulled her to the ground with a powerful jerk. A nasty bad breath blew onto Pete’s face after she fell on him with her full weight. She pressed his body tightly with her knees and pressed the broom crosswise on his chest so that he could hardly move.

“You think you can defeat me with physical strength?” She laughed viciously and pulled a soaked black cloth from her robe. “When in doubt, I prefer the tried and tested remedies from the witch’s kitchen!”

Pete tried to free himself from her power, but the witch beat him to it. She crumpled the cloth in her fist and pushed it under his nose with gentle pressure. The Second Investigator noticed a sweetish smell, then he became dizzy and his senses vanished...

With a queasy feeling in their stomachs, Jupiter and Bob followed Miss Carrera to the first floor of the apartment block.

The secretary had exquisite taste, at least as far as her furniture was concerned. Several oil paintings adorned the high walls and bizarre handmade art objects were scattered on the shelves. Miss Carrera took off her shoes and lowered herself onto a white leather cushion. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

Jupiter waved away with thanks. “We may come back to this later. First of all we should clarify some important questions first. May we sit down?”

“Please do.” Miss Carrera threw two voluminous cushions from the sofa onto the carpet. Jupiter sat down on and Bob also followed.

“So...” Miss Carrera came back to the subject. “Why did you follow me?”

The First Investigator took it upon himself not to be unsettled any further. “Would you mind if I asked you just one question first, ma’am? After you give us an honest answer, we promise to tell you what we know.”

“That sounds interesting.” She brought her knees up and let her chin drop. “Let’s hear it.”

“Where did the scratch on your cheek come from?”

Against her will, Miss Carrera suddenly had to laugh. “You’re not serious? You’re not gonna tell me you’ve been following me just to ask me that?”

“We have a reason to ask, so could you please answer the question honestly,” Jupiter countered with a serious expression on his face. “It is of the utmost importance.”

“Well, well...” The secretary got up off the sofa. “Wait a moment. I’ll be right back.”

The two detectives watched Miss Carrera disappear into a room and return shortly afterwards. In her arms was nestled a young Siamese cat.

“May I introduce you to my darling? This is Missy, my most loyal friend and protector. Missy, these two gentlemen are...”

“Uh, Jupiter Jones...”

“... And Bob Andrews,” Bob added. “Pleased to meet you.”

The secretary sat back down on the sofa with Missy.

“Monique Carrera,” she introduced herself. “But I guess you already know that. And this little lion wanted to demonstrate the sharpness of his claws to me this weekend after I accidentally burned his tail with a cigarette while cuddling him. Does that answer your question satisfactorily?”

“Basically, yes,” Jupiter admitted. “We have been misled by Mrs Thompson’s colleague, with whom she was sitting in the cafeteria at Vanity Phone World earlier today and whose name we don’t even know.”

“Mrs Thompson’s colleague?” At the mention of that name, Miss Carrera involuntarily flinched. “It must have been that old witch Mrs Faraday! What kind of a story did she tell you?”

“The old witch?” Bob nervously started tugging on the sofa cushion. “Well, she thought it was pretty odd to be mauled by a cat, though she doubted you even owned a cat.”

“But that wasn’t all she told you, right?” Miss Carrera suspected.

“Bull’s-eye, ma’am,” the First Investigator put in an explanation. “But frankly, we do not wish to comment on the rumours she said. Those are entirely private matters.”

A short smile played around the beautifully curved lips of the secretary until her face suddenly took on cold features. “Those are foul slanders! And if you don’t know it yet, you will know it now. Mr Acer, in a private conversation after office hours today, suggested that I should not set foot in the Vanity Phone World building for a ridiculous one-month severance pay. He said that I would be a disgrace and incompatible with the proper image and reputation of his company. He himself would not believe the rumours, but he could not afford to be so discredited, especially since the negative TV and press reports about the child kidnaps in connection with his witch’s phones are already causing enough trouble.

“I mean, look at me. How could anyone even consider that I’m not a real woman and was born a man? Do people have tomatoes on their eyes?”

The First Investigator rose from the pillow. “I can only hope that Mr Acer will regret his decision. Because even if there is some truth in Mrs Thompson’s words, his reaction is inhuman and in no way excusable.”

“I agree with that,” Bob said succinctly. “How did you respond to Mr Acer’s accusation and the severance proposal?”

Miss Carrera stroked her purring cat gently over his fur. “Vanity Phone World is already a thing of the past for me. I don’t need to worry about my future, as I can quickly find a new job,” she said optimistically. “But now I would like to have my questions answered. Why are you stalking me?”

“We will tell you everything, ma’am, from the beginning,” replied Jupiter sincerely. He had put his trust in the woman and decided not to leave out the slightest detail in his report. But before that, he called Headquarters and left Miss Carrera’s telephone number on the answering machine for the Second Investigator. Then he and Bob began to talk at length.

Outside, it had already become dark when all the facts of the witch’s phone case were openly presented. Miss Carrera had only listened quietly, but now she pressed her hands together in anxiety and broke her silence. “I am beginning to see a logical connection in the whole story! I think I know who is behind the child kidnaps!”

16. Pete is Captured

When Pete woke up, he was surrounded by darkness. He shivered and had a bad headache. Where was he? Carefully he groped his hands around him. Even before he had stretched out his arms completely, his fingers suddenly hit cold metal bars. Suddenly, he was wide awake and tried to stand up, but his head hit a hard object. Panic rose in him, for now he had the certainty of where he was—in a cage in the forest!

After a short orientation, he realized that there was no way out of this prison. In panic, he began to shake the bars and cried desperately for help. But his calls faded into the darkness without anything happening. Bit by bit, the memories returned to his head.

The witch had lured him to the school with a fake text message. She ambushed and sent him to the land of dreams with a rag soaked in chloroform. Then she transported him here and locked him in the cage. But what for? As much as he racked his brains over it, he couldn't make sense of it. Slowly his eyes began to get used to the darkness.

Suddenly, he heard a faint rustle. It sounded as if footsteps in rustling leaves were approaching.

“Help!” cried Pete with all his might. “Here I am! Get me out of here!” As he did so, he jiggled the metal bars wildly. “Let me out of here! Help!”

He looked strained in the direction from which the steps came, but still nothing could be seen. At this moment, a thunderous bang occurred directly in front of the cage and as before, under foggy clouds of smoke, the witch appeared. Ominously she approached the cage and threw devastating looks at Pete with glowing eyes.

“Oho, my little darling is awake and trembles with fear! You have every reason to be, because tonight will be the last night of your short life!”

“What... what are you gonna do to me?”

With puckered lips, the eerie old woman squeezed her narrow green face between the bars of the bars. “Come on, give dear Norma a kiss!”

Disgusted, Pete slipped into the furthest corner of the cage.

“Are you afraid of me?” she asked, giggling.

“Let me out of here!” Pete pleaded desperately.

The witch laughed croakily. “It’s already too late for that. You should have thought about that before... I can’t be bargained with... unless...” Suddenly she started to purr sweetly. “One way would be to change my mind. It might persuade me to show mercy before justice takes place...”

A glimmer of hope awoke in Pete. “What do you want? I will do whatever I can.”

“Then give me the witch’s phone!”

The Second Investigator looked at her in astonishment and immediately began to search his jacket pockets. “I... I no longer have it,” he stammered anxiously. “It... it’s gone!”

“I know that myself! After all, I searched you. Where did you hide the phone? Answer me!” Through the bars, she gave him a hard poke with the broomstick.

Pete was close to despair. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean! The witch’s phone was in my jacket pocket before you drugged me! I know that for a fact!”

“Don’t lie!” Again, she poked the broomstick. “Norma Nolla won’t be fooled!”

“Maybe it fell out of my pocket while fighting with you,” he considered the possibility. “Have you looked for it outside the gym.”

“Of course!” she raged out. “There was nothing! And with that, you have lost your chance. You will never get out of this cage alive!”

“Go away!” Pete yelled at her. “Go away!”

“Your wish is my command.” The witch did a noble curtsy. “I already have a devilish appetite. That is why I shall return at midnight. And then...” she took a scary pause. “Then I’m gonna eat you!”

Pete could no longer bear the sight of her terrible grimace. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the witch had disappeared without a trace.

In the meantime, Jupiter threw a worried glance at his watch. “It’s already after 8 pm Pete still hasn’t reported in. I’m starting to get worried.” He had just called Headquarters and Pete’s house, but he was not at both places.

He paced the living room of Miss Carrera. “Nevertheless, we’ll stick to our plan and take a taxi to Malibu on Westmint Road. But before we do, I will leave Pete our new destination on the answering machine at Headquarters. But if he still has not contacted us within the next two hours, we need to contact Mrs Scott to find out if her son has returned from the meeting with Pete. If he hasn’t, we can’t avoid informing her about Jeremy’s text message. I’d hate to take that action because it would expose us for violating our agreement to not involve Jeremy in the case.”

“Let’s get on with it, Jupe.” Bob was already slipping his jacket over his head. “Pete will be just fine. After all, he knows how to defend himself pretty well. But if you still want to be sure, call Mrs Scott and ask for the number of Jeremy’s mobile phone under a pretext. Tell her that we need the number urgently for our investigation. She’ll give it to us and we can easily get in touch with Pete.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Miss Carrera said and handed Jupiter her cordless phone. “Here, call her now.”

After entering Mrs Scott’s phone number into the phone, Jupiter waited for someone to answer. Soon, a wide wrinkle formed on his forehead. “Strange...”

“What is it?” Bob asked.

“The Scotts are not picking up their phone. The whole family seems to be out of the house... Anyway, I’ll leave them a message on their answering machine.”

When Jupiter, Bob and Miss Carrera got out of the taxi in front of the Westmint Road house, it was already 8:30 pm. A light was on behind the windows of a house overgrown with ivy.

“An almost unmistakable sign that someone is at home,” remarked Miss Carrera, who took brisk steps towards the front door. Once there, she pressed the bell button, next to which was engraved on a small metal plate with just one name: ‘Giorgio Cade’.

But there was no response to the ringing after a while, so Jupiter pressed the button again.

Suddenly a small window opened above their heads on the first floor, from which a man stuck his head out.

“One moment, I’ll be right down!” he shouted to them in a friendly voice. “I’m just getting out of the bath!”

The three didn’t have to wait for long, for the door was opened after half a minute. In front of them stood a middle-aged black-haired man in a red bathrobe. His face was smeared with a brown, thickly applied cream.

“Miss Carrera?” He squinted his eyes in surprise. “Of course it’s you! Even without my glasses, I recognize you. After all, one doesn’t meet such an attractive person like you every day! Please excuse my attire.” He pointed to his smudged face.

“But before going to bed, I treat myself to an occasional mud mask for skin care. Had I known that an expressive personality like you would visit me today, I would have worn something more suitable. You look ravishing.”

Miss Carrera didn’t care for the compliments. “Save your charm for later, Mr Cade. Once we’ve presented our case, you can continue your flattery if you feel like it afterwards.”

The First Investigator examined Mr Cade closely. “Tell me, haven’t we met before?”

“What... what do you mean?” he replied, irritated. “I don’t recall.”

“There’s something familiar about your eyes,” Jupiter said. “Did you ever have a full beard?”

Mr Cade laughed. “Oh, nonsense! It doesn’t suit me at all!”

“Of course, Jupe!” cried Bob. “I recognize him even with that face mask! And it’s true about the full beard! You are Mr Jordan—Jack Jordan—the reporter for *Washington Globe Magazine*! We met you in front of the Scott family home and saw you outside the Vanity Phone World building this afternoon!”

He made a dismissive gesture. “I’m a *Washington Globe Magazine* reporter? No, no, there must be some mistake. I probably have a double! To what do I owe the honour of your visit?”

“Perhaps we should discuss this with you inside the house.” Miss Carrera built herself up confidently in front of Mr Cade. “But if you’d rather, we could come back in half an hour... with the police!”

Mr Cade thought he heard wrong. “Is this a joke? What did I do? Come on in.”

As Mr Cade led his visitors into the living room, Bob discovered that the owner hadn’t lied to them on at least one point. When he walked in front of them, his feet left a wet trail. So he was actually in the bathtub.

“Before we sit down, I would like to briefly introduce these two boys to you,” Miss Carrera took the floor. “Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews. They work as detectives and are on the trail of the strange kidnapping incidents since the witch’s phones were sold.”

Mr Cade remained calm. “And what have I got to do with it? You seem to have forgotten that I—” The front door bell rang and interrupted his remarks. “Hello, who might that be? Wait here. I’ll go and see.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll accompany you,” Jupiter said briskly and followed the man into the corridor.

After Mr Cade had opened the front door, he looked at the visitor, who stood in front of him shivering. “Can I help you?” Mr Cade asked.

Jupiter’s eyes began to light up. “There you are! You’ve come at just the right time, Pete!”

17. Predator Instinct

In Mr Cade's living room, the exhausted Second Investigator sunk into an armchair. The strain of the past few hours was obvious to him.

"May I ask what's going on here?" Mr Cade tightened the belt on his bathrobe and put his hands on his hips.

"I would honestly be interested in that as well," Pete replied. "Not to mention that it wasn't Jeremy who met me at the Milton Primary School grounds, but our old acquaintance —the witch!"

"What?" Jupiter and Bob cried in unison.

The Second Investigator pointed to a graze on his forearm. "I fought a fierce duel with her until she successfully put me out of action with a rag soaked in chloroform. When I regained consciousness, she had already locked me up in a cage in the pitch dark forest."

"And then what?" Bob asked curiously.

"The old lady suddenly appeared in front of the cage and threatened to eat me if I didn't tell her where Jeremy's witch's phone was."

The First Investigator touched his forehead in a disturbed state. "Didn't you have it on you, Pete?"

"Of course," Pete replied. "You left it on the table at the Chinese restaurant. What else could I do but take the damn thing? But when I was in the cage, the witch saw me search my pockets but it was not there. I told her that it must have slipped out of my jacket during my fight with her in the school yard. The old lady wasn't buying it, though. Then she ran off with the announcement that she was coming back at midnight to carry out the death sentence."

Mr Cade shook his head without understanding. "Am I really surrounded by crazy people? What are you talking about?"

"Go on, Pete," Jupiter asked his friend.

"The witch wanted the mobile phone by all means, so she searched for it in my clothes when I passed out. Luckily she didn't take a look at my key chain, which has several lock picks on it. I used it to get myself out of the cage after she left!"

"Great work, Pete!" praised Bob appreciatively. "I guess the witch isn't as smart as we thought she was after all."

"Don't ask me how I did it," Pete continued with his report. "But after escaping from that cage, I instinctively and relatively quickly found the right way back to town. This time the witch had not sent me to the recreation area, but a smaller forest area in Westlake, near the Hollywood Freeway. There I immediately found a phone booth, from which I remotely checked our answering machine at Headquarters. Well, that's how I ended up here in Malibu and, frankly, I'm curious to know what you've learned in the meantime."

Jupiter sat down on a chair in reverse and supported his elbows on the backrest. "As you can already guess, Pete, we were wrong to suspect Miss Carrera as the witch. We've been with her for the last two hours. So she could not have been the one who, in the witch's disguise, attacked and locked you in the cage."

"However, Miss Carrera was able to give us the name of a person who has a comprehensible reason to stage all this witchcraft with the mobile phones and the spectacular

child kidnaps. A man who developed the idea and the concept of the witch's phone on his own and whose trust was shamelessly abused by Vanity Phone World, more precisely by Mr Acer. The man I am talking about is this gentleman here—Mr Giorgio Cade!"

"Are you out of your senses?" Mr Cade gasped for breath. "This is a malicious insinuation and a vile intrigue!"

Miss Carrera looked at him with a serious expression. "But I do know, Mr Cade. After all, I was sitting in the office of Vanity Phone World's managing director. That was from the moment about nine months ago, when you first visited Mr Acer in his office to offer him your idea of the witch's phone. Mr Acer realized immediately that he was facing what he called a crazy genius—which was what he kept calling you in your absence.

"But he had just as quickly noticed that you didn't have the faintest idea about commercial matters. These two characteristics awakened the predator instinct in him and so he developed a strategy to pull the concept of the witch's phone away from you without paying a cent."

Mr Cade remained motionless in the middle of the room. "Did Mr Acer include you in this strategy, Miss Carrera?"

"No," she replied bluntly. "He would never have spoken to me about it. But I have good ears, even when the door is closed. That's why I also know that with the idea of the witch's phone, he has offered you the deal of a lifetime. The only condition he imposed on you was that he wanted to apply for the patent himself because he was supposed to have better contacts than you do. He promised to give you thirty percent of the profits. But the reality was different."

"And how, may I ask?" Bob enquired.

Mr Cade fist-bumped the desk in agitation. "I blindly trusted his promises, gave him the design plans of the phone for registration and merely sealed the deal with a handshake. Mr Acer assured me that he would contact me as soon as the production of the witch's phones began. But I never received a message. When I went to his office, he would always brush me off with the succinct explanation that the project could not be realized yet as a cost plan would have to be drawn up first, and that would be very time-consuming. You can probably imagine what I was going through when I opened a magazine a few weeks ago in which Vanity Phone World had placed a full-page ad promoting my witch's phone! I rushed straight to Mr Acer's office and that day I had the most painful experience of my life."

"How did Mr Acer react to your visit?" Jupiter asked.

"He asked me in all seriousness how could I possibly have anything to do with the development of the witch's phone." Mr Cade's eyeballs came out in a rage. "He asked me to provide him with documents showing that an agreement had been made between myself and Vanity Phone World for me to be involved in the project. But I don't have them! I did not even have copies of my development plans. That rascal had already taken all the originals from me in advance!"

"When I went to see a lawyer and told him what had happened, he just expressed his regret. The prospect of even the slightest chance of a case against Vanity Phone World could be buried from the outset. And all this because I believed in the good in people! How can I be so stupid and naïve!" Once again, he punched the desk with his fist. "I detest this unscrupulous man! I wish his company perishes!"

"And so you had the idea to bring the witch's phones into disrepute in such a way that Vanity Phone World would be banned from selling these phones by court order," Jupiter said to Mr Cade straight out.

"Now, wait a minute here..." Mr Cade interrupted.

“Hold on, Mr Cade. Please let me finish first,” Jupiter said. “The whole thing had to be cleverly contrived. It had to look as if the phone company had a hand in boosting the sales of the phones. You, Mr Cade, set out to track down children who already had a witch’s phone, find out their phone number and lure them by text message under a flimsy pretext. I could swear that the pickup truck out front is yours. A cage can certainly be transported around in it without any problems.”

“You must be out of your mind!” Mr Cade burst out.

The inventor began to boil inside, but the First Investigator continued unperturbed. “You gave a credible performance as a witch. By that, of course, I mean only outward appearances. You looked really scary in the midst of all those smoke bombs. You could never quite decide whether you wanted to play the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, or the women’s rights activist Norma Nolla, whose terrible fate you took advantage of in your creepy production. It doesn’t matter. But ambushing the children in this disguise, stunning them and leaving them locked in a cage in the forest overnight, is an unforgivable offence and will be severely punished by the law. After all, the innocent children have done you no harm and have nothing to do with the feud between you and Mr Acer.”

“I can’t believe it!” Pete got out of his chair, furious. “And why did you come after us, Mr Cade? It wasn’t like we had a witch’s phone. At least not until the time you lured us to the alleged Moreland apartment by e-mail. We didn’t fit into your plan to take revenge on Vanity Phone World.”

“Pete, we did not fit into his plan, but he discovered that we were on his trail,” Jupiter took the explanation. “We could well jeopardize his efforts. In the stairwell, he had practically told us. Remember what he said when he tried to intimidate us as a witch? ‘You will pay for meddling in things that are done by order of the devil! Stay out of everything!’”

“But where did he get the information about us from?” Bob was puzzled. “It couldn’t have been from Jeremy.”

“What did you just say? ‘It couldn’t have been from Jeremy’?” A flash of inspiration shot through the First Investigator’s head. “Oh, yeah, that’s right... That’s it! That’s how it worked. There is no better way!”

18. Tricked

Mr Cade clapped his hands loudly. “You’re crazy! If you don’t get out of my house this instant, I’m going to call the police!”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, sir,” Jupiter replied pointedly. “But could you wait a little longer with this phone call? I’m not finished with my remarks yet.”

“Come on, Jupe!” Bob urged to hurry. “How did it all work?”

“There is one way. Jeremy was lured into the woods with a text message. A short time later, you two found his bag in the recreation area, in which his mobile phone was in it. Bob took it and brought it to our headquarters. The next day, we handed it over to Mrs Scott together with our business card. And as luck would have it, we were asked to go to the home of the alleged father of the kidnapped Grace Moreland that same evening. There, the witch was already waiting for us, providing us with all the necessary threats. How do you explain this?”

“I’m totally on the edge and have absolutely no idea,” the Second Investigator had to admit.

“Makes sense.” Miss Carrera drove through her thick hair. “There must be a bug in that phone. It was used to let Mr Cade know what was going on. Presumably, a member of the Scott family read the email address on the business card aloud. And that witch’s phone must have been in the vicinity!”

The First Investigator gave Miss Carrera an appreciative smile. “Bravo, ma’am!”

“So with this trick, he got the phone numbers he needed,” Bob thought. “After all, every mobile phone owner occasionally shares them with their friends. And so the witch could cheerfully send one text message after the other and even include personal background information of her victims in the messages.”

Pete turned to Mr Cade. “Would you mind telling us how you managed to get a bug on the phones without anyone noticing?”

“You’re totally out of your mind,” he blurted out. “I won’t say another word.”

“That won’t be necessary yet,” Jupiter triumphed, “because we have more issues to reveal.”

The inventor made a step forward and said in a stern voice: “Let me tell you this—if you don’t leave my house immediately, I’ll call the police and report you for trespassing and slander!”

However, the First Investigator made no attempt to move. “Anyway, we prefer to wait here comfortably for the police. Because we would be very interested to hear what the officers have to say about the scratch Pete inflicted on your face last Friday after you had given us such a hard time in the witch costume.”

Mr Cade faltered. “What scratch are you talking about?”

“The one which you are hiding under the mud mask on your right cheek!” replied Jupiter thoughtfully.

But this time, Mr Cade didn’t let himself be drawn out. “There is a scratch on my face, but I didn’t apply this mask to hide it underneath. This cream that I put on has a healing effect on the skin. Besides, it wasn’t Pete who inflicted this scratch on me, but the sharp edge of a

coral reef that I accidentally grazed while diving the last weekend. By the way, you will not have failed to notice that Miss Carrera's cheek is also adorning a wound. Why do you not suspect her?"

"You will hardly believe it, but we also suspected Miss Carrera of being the victim of Pete's fingernails," the First Investigator explained, "but we made a small mistake in judgement."

"A mistake in judgement?" Mr Cade questioned.

"Right. Pete was sure he had scratched the witch's right cheek. When we met Miss Carrera this morning in Mr Acer's office, he saw her face only in the reflection of the computer monitor and discovered the wound on her right cheek. He had not considered, however, that the view was reversed and that in reality, the scratch was on her left cheek. That puts Miss Carrera beyond suspicion."

"There's more, Mr Cade. It's almost ridiculous that we were intimidated by your anonymous '666' text message as well as the runic characters you painted on the wall in the condemned house. The runic characters should make us believe that witchcraft is really involved, because in many lore and legends, witches communicate with these characters."

Now it was Bob's turn. "But looking at it closely, the characters revealed a lot about your intentions. You seem to really hate the managing director of Vanity Phone World. And so you let your feelings run free with the help of the runic characters. The characters representing 'possessions', 'conflict', 'fate' and 'justice' tie in very much with how you feel about Mr Acer."

Jupiter looked closely at Mr Cade. "Finally, you couldn't resist the temptation to be in the forefront of the events. So you appeared on the scene as Jack Jordan, an alleged reporter for *Washington Globe Magazine*, whenever the media was on the trail of your witch performance."

"Your astuteness leaves a lot to be desired," Mr Cade commented. "But then, how could I be accused of kidnapping? I admit that I wish to get back on Mr Acer and I am entitled to that. After all, that rascal robbed me of my idea. But that doesn't mean I would use young children for revenge and lock them in a cage. And so, I'll give you one last piece of advice—without evidence, you can't catch a criminal."

Everyone fell silent. The four guests in the house looked at each other, somewhat waiting for someone to say something.

The Second Investigator hesitated for a moment, but then he reached out his hand to Mr Cade in a conciliatory manner. "I guess you're right, Mr Cade. I would like to apologize on behalf of my friends and Miss Carrera for our baseless insinuations. Please don't hold it against us. Anyone can go crazy."

Jupiter started to say something but Pete stopped him in time.

Mr Cade took a deep breath. "I won't hold it against you if you just leave my house now and never bother me again with your outrageous accusations. As I have said, you do not have concrete evidence, and neither do the phone company nor the police."

"Thank you, Mr Cade, we appreciate it. Could I use your phone to call us a taxi? I left my car at home." Without waiting for an answer, Pete walked up to the desk, picked up the phone and dialled a number.

After a few seconds, a quiet, muffled giggle suddenly sounded under the desk.

Mr Cade turned around in horror. "What is that?"

As quick as lightning, Pete had stepped behind the desk and reached for a black soft bag. "You rascal! Give me that bag!" Mr Cade cried.

With one leap, Mr Cade rushed up to Pete and tried to snatch the bag from him. But the Second Investigator wouldn't part with it. So Mr Cade took harder measures. With one quick movement, he pulled a gun out of the pocket of his bathrobe.

"Give me the bag or I'll pull the trigger!"

"There's a witch's phone inside this bag," Pete stammered, while holding the bag tightly with both arms. The giggling sounds were still audible. "Not just any witch's phone, but Jeremy's."

"How did it get in there?" Mr Cade was still pointing the gun at him.

"I... I have... tricked you." Pete's heart was pounding.

Mr Cade couldn't believe his ears. "What? Say it again."

At that moment, with a quick scream, he fell to the floor. Behind him was Miss Carrera, who had struck him down with two hard blows to the neck. She bent down and took the gun from his hand. "Wow, that was close! Are you all right, Pete?"

"Thank you, ma'am, I'm fine. But now I want to get that phone out of there." He put the bag on the desk and tampered with the zip. "This giggling is beginning to get on my nerves."

"It's much easier if you do this..." Jupiter went to the desk and put the receiver back on the switch hook. At that moment, the witch's phone went silent.

When the bag was opened, the four of them looked curiously at the contents. Jupiter reached in first and pulled out a black robe. "The witch costume! So we were right in our suspicions. My goodness, this is heavy. What's all that in the pockets?"

"Definitely Jeremy's witch's phone!" Pete was glowing. "Just before Cade tried to put the chloroform cloth on my nose, I managed to slip the phone into his robe pocket without him noticing. I remembered what you said, Jupe: 'As long as a mobile phone is switched on, the police are able to determine its location.' Must have been the right inspiration at the right moment!"

"Great work, Pete!" praised Jupiter radiantly.

"And how did you get Jeremy's phone number?" Bob asked.

"A fortunate coincidence! That was what Mrs Scott left on our answering machine in response to Jupe's request. When I checked our answering machine remotely, her message was the first one recorded."

"Here, look at this!" The First Investigator nested at the bottom of the robe and pulled out a strange construction of wire, batteries and cords. "Miniature pyrotechnics. This device activates the smoke bombs! Wow!"

"No wonder," Pete remarked. "With him carrying around this load of gadgets, he wouldn't have felt the extra weight of Jeremy's phone when I sneaked it into the robe."

Bob took out a transparent plastic bag from the black bag and blew a whistle. "And with this, another secret is cleared up," Bob added. "The witch mask consists of several latex parts, which are fixed to the face with this special glue. Only the pointed chin, the nose and the lower eye areas are artificial. The remaining free skin areas were simply dyed with green paint. So I guess it is clear why Pete could hurt the witch on her cheek. When we got here, Mr Cade was just getting out of the bathtub. I guess he had got rid of the green paint in the tub. Look, here are the green rubber gloves."

In addition to the witch hat and a pair of black boots, there was a battery-operated cassette player in the suitcase. Bob rewound the cassette and pressed the start button.

A creepy male voice came up. "Do you have his phone, Norma?"

"The witch was addressed by this voice. Remember? Jeremy spoke of it." Bob pushed the stop button. "All this rotten magic! That was Cade, too, with a disguised voice that was supposed to sound especially scary."

“Fellas, I’ve had enough of this nonsense!” Jupiter said. “Mr Cade seems to me to be a crazy and dangerous madman who has pulled out all the stops in his vengeance mania. I’m going to notify the police.”

While Jupiter was on phone, Pete pointed to the still unconscious Mr Cade. “In all probability, Miss Carrera, you saved my life. I have to thank you for that. I just loved the way you put that lunatic down.”

Proudly, the lady threw her long blond hair down her neck. “When I was a kid, I was the undefeated karate champion at Playwood College.”

“Playwood College?” The Second Investigator paused. “Isn’t that a boys’ boarding school?”

Miss Carrera smiled sheepishly. Instead of giving him an answer, she winked at him.

“Madness!” Jeremy was beaming all over his face. It was the next afternoon. Jupiter, Pete and Bob had been invited by Mrs Scott to celebrate the safe return of the kidnapped children and the arrest of Mr Cade.

When The Three Investigators entered the Scotts’ living room and handed Jeremy his witch’s phone, he jumped for joy. His sister Hannah and her grandmother also gave the detective trio appreciative smiles.

Meanwhile, the TV was on in the background. *Network TV* was broadcasting the weather forecast.

“Have a seat,” Mrs Scott offered her visitors a place on the sofa. The table was set with cake, chocolate cookies and a refreshing fruit punch.

Jupiter’s mouth watered at the sight. “I don’t know what to say...”

Mrs Scott poured the punch into the glasses and with a sigh, settled herself on a chair. “I’m really proud of you three!” She raised her glass and saluted her guests.

“Thank you, Mrs Scott,” Jupiter beamed. “Just to tie up the loose ends of this case, we’ve just received a call from the Malibu police. The police have interrogated Mr Cade and he has admitted to all of his actions.

“Mr Cade revealed that his design of the witch’s phone contain an electronic chip that can be programmed remotely. He had intended to use this for future upgrades and features of the phone. It was an ingenious idea, which was probably why Mr Acer had called him a crazy genius,” Jupiter said. “However, when he came up with the diabolical plan to bring down Vanity Phone World, he remotely programmed the chips of selected phones to function as a bug. The programming was all done from his house. Then, he only had to sit in front of the receiver and he could choose his victims at will from the mainly young owners. Jeremy, with his interest in witchcraft, came in handy.”

“Now if anyone can tell me how to send an anonymous text message to a mobile phone,” Mrs Scott asked.

“I have also found out about that in the meantime,” Jupiter trumped up with his knowledge. “For this trick you don’t even need to be a computer specialist. It is child’s play and can be performed on any personal computer. All you need is a modem. Then you use a computer program to send an anonymous message.”

“Quiet!” Hannah suddenly shouted. She reached for the remote control of the TV and turned the sound up. “Here comes Jenny Collins with a final report on the witch’s phone affair!”

All those present focussed on the screen. The star reporter of *Network TV* presented herself to her viewers with a sense of victory.

“Last night, the sensational wave of kidnappings in connection with the witch’s phones of the mobile phone company Vanity Phone World came to a surprising end. Around 9 pm, fifty-two-year-old Giorgio Cade was arrested in Malibu. The police have obtained solid evidence of Mr Cade’s crime. Three teenage boys, who wished to remain anonymous at their request, succeeded in getting the child kidnapper arrested in his private home. Investigations revealed that Cade, an unemployed inventor, wanted to take revenge on Bob Acer, the managing director of Vanity Phone World. Mr Cade alleged that Mr Acer had snatched and exploited the idea of the spectacular witch’s phone from him in a devious and criminal way.

“Earlier this morning, a witness and former employee of the mobile phone company, came forward to confirm Mr Acer’s fraudulent actions. She is willing to repeat her testimony in court under oath. Due to this fact, the further sale of the witch’s phones was discontinued immediately. Those who are already in possession of this gadget can consider themselves lucky. Industry insiders suspect that the witch’s phones sold so far have become a coveted collector’s item whose value exceeds the sale price many times over!”

Jeremy cradled his witch’s phone like a precious treasure in his hands. He grinned contentedly and was in the best of health despite the torment he had experienced. He knew he could finally sleep well again tonight...